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26
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

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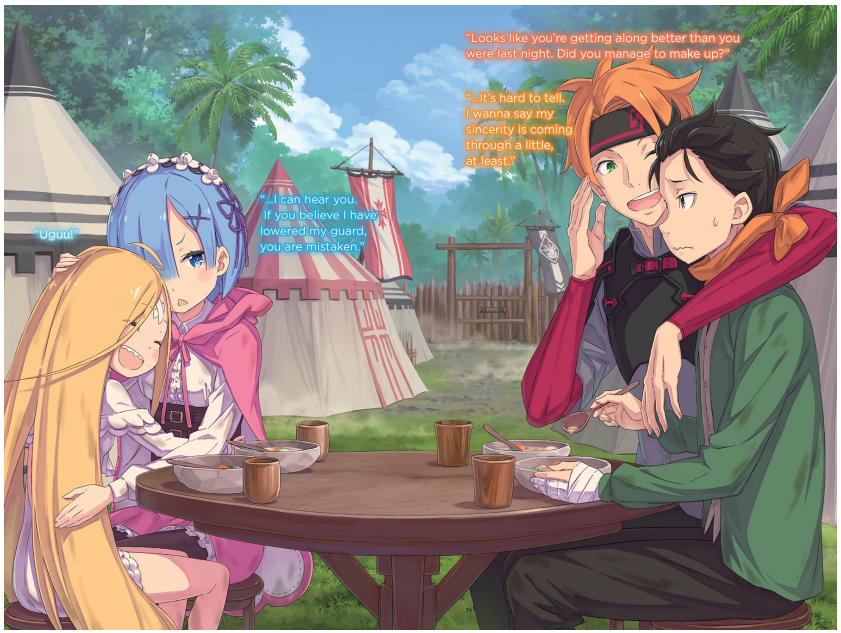
Past and Present


"Looks like you're getting along better than you were last night. Did you manage to make up?"
"...It's hard to tell. I wanna say my sincerity is coming through a little, at least."
"...I can hear you. If you believe I have lowered my guard, you are mistaken."
"Uguu!!"

"Gaaaah! I knew it!!!"
"It's coming, Subaru Natsuki!"
"I can see that! Damn it! It's been one trial after another lately!"
"Fight and prove yourselves true warriors! The eyes of the Shudrak are watching!"

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 26

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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PROLOGUE

THE PEOPLE AT THE WATCHTOWER

1

This was what happened while Subaru Natsuki was unconscious and recuperating in the green room, right after Emilia had guided the group to the first floor of the Pleiades Watchtower.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

When they heard the voice that greeted them and saw who had spoken those words, the entire group was struck speechless.

That was only natural. What awaited them on the first floor was a gigantic dragon clad in blue scales—a legendary being everyone in the Kingdom of Lugunica had heard of.

"You weren't expecting this, right? Climbing the tower to find Volcanica waiting here. I was *really* surprised, too…"

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Does surprise even begin to describe it, I wonder?"

Having coming face-to-face with the sacred dragon, Beatrice's voice and hands trembled as she spoke, and she wasn't the only one who had lost her cool.

"Th-this is…"

Even Anastasia couldn't maintain her ever-constant composure.

"*Sigh*. Even I didn't see this coming. What the heck. Wasn't the Holy Dragon supposed to be somewhere beyond the Great Waterfalls?"

"That is what I've heard as well. According to the Dragon Tablet, Volcanica will supposedly return to reforge the covenant

with Lugunica's new leader in the same year the royal selection is decided."

Echidna was currently in scarf form, and a hint of unease could be heard in her voice even as she corroborated Anastasia's words.

Meanwhile, Julius stepped forward in his dazzling white armor and placed his sword on the ground as he bowed to Volcanica with the deepest respect.

"O, venerable dragon, holy guardian who watches over our kingdom. My humblest apologies for any discourtesy we may have shown you, Lord Volcanica, savior of our people and the one who has upheld the covenant for untold years."

It was the epitome of decorum for a knight who served the Dragronfriend Kingdom. In response, Volcanica's golden eyes narrowed.

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

"As you wish! I am fully devoted in mind and body to Lady Anastasia Hoshin, who also stands before you. She who will surely be our next ruler and covenant-keeper, Lady Anastasia…ngh…"

"A-are you crying, Julius?"

"M-my apologies. Not only have I exchanged words with one of the three great heroes, Reid Astrea, but now I also have the privilege of meeting the Holy Dragon Volcanica… There is no greater honor possible… This tower is indescribable."

Julius wiped a tear from the corner of his eye as his voice trembled in awe.

Emilia didn't want to break the bad news to Julius right when he was having a moment, but, knowing she had to, she awkwardly began to explain.

"Umm, it's a little hard for me to say this, seeing how happy you are…"

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"…Wait a tick. That line feels a bit familiar," Anastasia said, having noticed the dragon repeating itself.

Emilia wore a look of resignation.

"Umm, about Volcanica… It seems that it's been waiting here for so long that it's made it *really* forgetful. Its body is fine, though, and it can definitely still run a bit wild…"

The dragon's body remained more than capable, but its mind struggled to stay sharp against the passage of time. It had barred

Emilia's way as the examiner for the first floor, but—perhaps because its duty was complete once Emilia had reached the monolith—it had then reverted to a state of confusion and obliviousness.

And despite the fact that the examination was long over, the dragon continued to repeat itself.

"Th-the Holy Dragon has grown old, you say…?" Julius staggered from sheer shock.

"C-calm down, Julius. You must be exhausted. Here, take a seat and rest a while," Anastasia said.

After Reid had betrayed Julius's expectations so dramatically, Emilia was reluctant to dash Julius's hopes, especially after she saw the excitement brimming in his eyes, but…

"Emilia, that isn't the issue. This can't be called forgetfulness," Beatrice said.

"Huh?"

"I suppose you feel it as well, Echidna. This dragon is…"

"You're right. It's obvious when you take a closer look. This isn't mere mental degradation. The dragon is hollow."

"'Hollow'…?"

Emilia cocked her head in confusion at the two artificial spirits' words.

"It's exactly what it sounds like. The soul is gone…leaving nothing inside. What remains can only recite certain words and employ a limited set of responses. Think of it like being ninety percent asleep."

"Ninety percent… But it was *really* strong."

"If its soul were present, it would have been incomparably stronger."

Emilia shuddered, catching the implied *You got lucky* in Echidna's tone.

With the help of her ice soldiers, Emilia had just barely survived. It was unbelievable that Volcanica had essentially been half asleep the entire fight.

"Missing soul aside, this is unmistakably the Holy Dragon…or its body, I suppose. In which case, there might be a way to help the people of Pristella."

"!!! A way to help everyone? What should we do?"

"I see… We can get the Holy Dragon's blood!" Anastasia said, snapping her fingers.

Beatrice nodded, and Emilia's eyes widened as she realized the significance of what Anastasia had suggested.

Volcanica's blood was the subject of many legends passed down in Lugunica. The Holy Dragon's blood could revive barren land, ensure an abundant harvest, and instantly heal any sickness or injury. These were just a few of the incredible effects attested to in ancient records.

And that made it something Emilia couldn't simply ignore…

"If we can get blood from Volcanica…"

Emilia's ultimate goal in joining the royal selection was to acquire the dragon's blood and use it to thaw the frozen forest of Elior.

All of Emilia's kindred were trapped in ice because her power had run wild. Freeing them was why she had come this far.

"_____"

And now Emilia had stumbled upon what she had been searching for all this time. She was so stunned, she forgot to breathe.

If she could obtain Volcanica's blood here, then there was no longer any need for her to pursue the throne.

"I…"

"Sorry for confusing you, Emilia, but the blood you are thinking of and the blood Volcanica has are different things," Beatrice explained to Emilia, who had been on the verge of losing her reason for participating in the royal selection.

"Eh?" Emilia's eyes widened. "What do you mean? I studied this *very* carefully. The dragon's blood that will melt the ice trapping everyone is supposed to be in the castle. So…"

"That isn't wrong. The dragon blood bequeathed to the royal family of Lugunica after they forged the covenant with the Holy Dragon Volcanica can heal any disease, and has the power to restore any withered, blasted land. It should even be able to thaw the Elior woods you wish to restore. However…"

Beatrice lowered her gaze and paused for a moment as Emilia watched her imploringly. Then she blinked her distinctive eyes and continued.

"The blood that was given to the kingdom is not Volcanica's blood. The substance we refer to as 'dragon's blood' comes from the final heartbeat of a dying dragon… It is, in essence, that dragon's heart and soul."

“The heart and soul of…a dying dragon…?”

This new information made Emilia arch her eyebrows sharply. To her question, Beatrice simply nodded quietly.

“May I?” Julius raised his hand.

Having seemingly recovered from the shock of learning about Volcanica’s lack of a soul, Julius looked up at the Holy Dragon, whose countenance remained unchanged.

“Lady Beatrice, if I might ask, where did you learn all this? I am a knight in the Kingdom of Lugunica’s royal guard. I have heard my share of secrets. However, what you speak of is…”

“With the final pulse of the heart, the dragon’s blood is poured into a vessel. That blood—true dragon’s blood—was entrusted to the royal family and became proof of the covenant sworn between dragon and people.”

“_____”

“It is understandable you wouldn’t know. This comes from a record sealed away in the Archive of Forbidden Books…a record left by the Witch of Greed, Echidna, whose name has nearly been forgotten by this world.”

Julius’s eyes shot open, and he stopped breathing.

Despite being a knight who directly served the royal family, he had never heard this before, yet he couldn’t imagine Beatrice was lying. And if her words were true…

“Then which dragon did the blood kept in Lugunica Castle come from? If it is from the final beat of their heart, then…”

“It would be stranger if the dragon it came from wasn’t already dead…and that means our empty-headed-but-very-much-alive Holy Dragon here ain’t the one.”

Julius and Anastasia’s doubts were reasonable.

If dragon’s blood really was produced by the final beat of a dying dragon’s heart, then Volcanica couldn’t possibly have been the source of it. And if it was still that powerful, then…

“It’s unknown, I suppose. Unfortunately, that much was not recorded.”

“…Well, that’s a bit disappointing. Just a guess, but I suppose that Witch of Greed is the main reason why Natsuki is so cold with me? After hearing this story, I have to say I can’t blame him.”

“I won’t let you bad-mouth Mother. Watch what you say.”

“Don’t fight, you two! But, um,…”

After she’d scolded the bickering pair, Emilia quietly looked

down.

This was the first time she had considered that the dragon's blood in the castle and the blood of Volcanica were not one and the same. The idea came as a shock, but also a bit of a relief.

"…What a strange feeling."

Saving everyone in the Elior Forest was her ultimate goal. That was still true, even now. If taking Volcanica's blood would solve everything, then in theory, that was exactly what she should do.

But she hesitated.

Should she step down and retire from the royal selection if there was another way of achieving her goal?

"…Emilia's concerns aside, if Beatrice is right, then can this Holy Dragon's blood do what we're trying to achieve? Isn't it more likely to be a bust?" Anastasia asked.

"Since long ago, I suppose the blood of dragons has been highly valued as a catalyst for magic. Even if it is not true dragon's blood, the blood of the living Holy Dragon Volcanica should still possess immense power. However…"

Beatrice glanced at Emilia. Detecting the anxiety in her eyes, Emilia understood why she seemed so apologetic.

Even with the blood of the Holy Dragon Volcanica…

"I won't be able to unfreeze everyone in the forest."

"…Unfortunately, no."

Beatrice nodded sadly.

Somehow, she looked more dejected than Emilia did.

"It's okay," Emilia said with a soft expression. Then she lifted her head, determined to not look discouraged. "It's *really* unfortunate, but it wasn't like I came here with any expectations. I was more surprised than anything, and there wasn't enough time for it to really sink in, so…I'm just peachy."

"I should have mentioned it sooner… Though I did not expect to encounter the Holy Dragon here of all places, I suppose. Regretfully."

"That's right. What a troublemaker."

At the end of the day, Emilia didn't want to see such a glum look on Beatrice's face.

The disappointment did sting. But what Beatrice said was true. If anything, it made more sense that there would be no shortcuts.

"Still, I didn't know there was such a distinction when it comes to dragon's blood… Incidentally, if we had the Holy Dragon here

die for us and took its heart's blood…"

"L-Lady Anastasia?!"

"Kidding, just kidding. Don't get mad, Julius. I wasn't serious."

Anastasia raised her hands and quickly walked back her suggestion once she saw Julius's wide-eyed reaction.

The joke caught Emilia by surprise, but she was naturally against that idea, too. Of course, she wanted to thaw the Elior Forest and save the people of Pristella, but…

"I don't think it's right to sacrifice Volcanica to do it."

"Fine, fine. It's not like I'm eager to do it, either… It's just a possibility," Anastasia said, sticking out her tongue.

"Dear, oh dear," Echidna sighed from around Anastasia's neck. "Anyway, let's review. There was some great dragon who was Volcanica's equal in the past, and the dragon's blood in Lugunica Castle comes from that dragon. Volcanica swore a covenant with the royal family of Lugunica and gave them that blood as a sign of friendship. That's the truth behind the history, then?"

"Now that dragons are almost entirely extinct, it would be difficult to confirm, I suppose. But yes, it's true."

"The Holy Dragon *is* right here, though. If we can't have the lifeblood of a dragon, then we can at least get some fresh blood from the Holy Dragon and see if we can help the people in Pristella."

"According to the legends, a single drop of the dragon's blood in the castle could restore vast swaths of land, so maybe it will make a powerful medicine?"

"Fresh blood and heart blood are different things, I suppose. But there is no proof that simply pouring it on something will have an effect. It's nothing more than a starting point for figuring out a treatment," said Beatrice.

"It's still a major step forward compared to not having any idea of what to do next. If it really can be an elixir that works on anything, then it's worth investigating."

As she listened to them talk, Emilia began to feel some hope again.

They had come all the way to Auguria to help all those people who had met such terrible fates. If they could find a solution for all the terrible things that Gluttony and Lust had done, there could be nothing better.

"Mm-hmm, okay. In that case, let's try asking Volcanica. We

might not be able to communicate, and there's a chance they'll go berserk again if we try to take their blood, but it's still worth a try."

"All that sounds less than appealing… Emilia, you should have been recognized as the new administrator of the Pleiades Watchtower, yes? Can you not use that somehow, I wonder?" Beatrice asked.

"The administrator… I don't really feel any different, though…"

After they'd all solved the riddle of the third floor, Emilia had gotten past Reid on the second floor and demonstrated her will to Volcanica on the first. It seemed fair to say Emilia had conquered the watchtower. Despite that, she hadn't sensed any obvious changes.

There was one thing she had noticed, though…

"The sands shouldn't block anyone from reaching this tower anymore…I think?"

"Was that something you decided? There are some pretty dangerous things in those books of the dead. The Witch Cult might pay this place a visit, too. All that sounds a bit risky, don't you think?"

"It might be, but I think if everyone is careful, it'll be all right. There's too much for us to decide everything on our own."

The watchtower simply raised too many questions. For better or for worse, they didn't have the right to decide what to do by themselves. They needed to confer with others, seek out their wisdom, and find the best way forward.

"That's what I think, at least. Is that bad?"

"…I think that's a bit too optimistic, but that answer suits you. If Ana and Julius aren't against it, then I won't say no, either."

"Thank you, Echidna."

Echidna was the first to agree.

"Fine, I get it," said Anastasia, waving her hand. "I'm not opposed. Besides, even if we did decide to hide it, it would be a ton of work to look after… Better to just split the reward for discovering it and making it so people can even get here in the first place."

"It was you who reached the summit of this tower, Lady Emilia. I shall respect your decision."

"Thank you, Anastasia, Julius." Emilia smiled at them as well. Then she turned to Beatrice, who was the only one who had yet to chime in. "What about you, Beatrice? Do you think it's

irresponsible?”

“If that is your question, it would be far more irresponsible to abandon this place without further investigation. Betty is not against your decision. Personally, I am deeply interested.”

“Thank goodness!”

Relieved that her cohort was not against her decision, Emilia breathed a sigh of relief.

She was sure that if everyone worked together, they would find some way to put this tower to good use.

“Okay, all that’s left is getting the blood… Will Volcanica come with us?”

“That feels like a problem waiting to happen.”

Volcanica was so massive, it would make traveling difficult. And even if they asked the dragon to wait outside whenever they ventured into a town, the sight of it alone would undoubtedly cause alarm.

If Volcanica were able to assume a smaller form, like Puck, that would have helped, but…

“Hey, Volcanica, will you come with us? Or, if you have to stay here, would you share some of your blood…?”

“_____”

“Volcanica?”

Emilia didn’t want to get her hopes up after what had happened during the examination, but she still found the dragon’s reaction curious.

Having returned to its original position on the floor beside the pillar that stood on the tower’s first floor, the Holy Dragon slowly raised its head and looked out from the tower.

There was no sign it had any intention of attacking or responding to the question.

Emilia found this all very strange.

At the same time…

“What’s that?”

A chill ran down her back. It felt like a cold finger had traced the path of her spine. Seeking out the source of that feeling, Emilia quickly turned toward the eastern side of the tower—where Volcanica was also looking.

To the east, beyond the desert, lay the great waterfall marking the very edge of the world. And one other special place could be found there.

“Emilia! I suppose this is quite bad!”

The first to realize what was causing that bad feeling was Beatrice. By the time Emilia had turned around to grab her small, outstretched hand, the menace had already reached the tower.

The desert surrounding the watchtower bulged upward as a dark shadow welled up from underground. It looked like the earth itself was about to capsize, and the resulting shock wave swallowed the tower.

“Ahhhhhh!”

“Lady Anastasia!”

Grabbing Anastasia, Julius crouched down to the shuddering floor, and Emilia pulled Beatrice close and gritted her teeth, enduring the shock.

What had happened? She did not know what that shadow she had seen for an instant was, but…

“Wha— Volcanica?!”

Looking up, Emilia saw the blue-scaled dragon rising. The Holy Dragon spread its wings and flew into the sky. Buffeted by the lashing wind, Emilia saw Volcanica inhale deeply. Its chest swelled with air as the blue Holy Dragon prepared its breath.

“Everyone, get down!!!”

They were caught between tremors from below and a gale from above. In the midst of it all, Emilia desperately called out a warning to the others. And then—

“I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will.”

By now, this line was painfully familiar to them, but what followed was something far less so.

A blinding blue light threatened to engulf the clear sky itself as Volcanica’s breath shot out and pushed back the black shadow surging across the desert.

The next instant, the blue light swelled, and sound, smell, and everything else in the world disappeared.

Azure light crashed against jet-black shadow. It almost seemed like this was the center of a world-encompassing explosion—no, in that moment, the center of the world was undoubtedly here, in this desert at the eastern edge of the world.

From a distance, it probably made for a very confusing sight. But from up close, it seemed as if the world itself was ending.

Beatrice and Echidna had described Volcanica as dormant.

And they were right. This was but a fragment of Volcanica’s

true strength.

The blue breath and black shadow were locked in a contest of power that had no rules or limits. Despite the ferocity of it, a terrible silence enveloped the struggle. It was only then that Emilia noticed their surroundings had hardly been touched.

"_____"

The clash between blue and black ended in an instant. It was clear now that, surprisingly, there was very little destruction.

The wind sounded too quiet, and the tremors faded so quickly one could almost believe that nothing had happened. Though still reeling from the shock, Julius and Anastasia had recovered enough to open their eyes.

"I-is it over…?"

"So it would seem… But what was that?"

Now that the shock waves had receded, they cautiously peered around. The Holy Dragon quietly descended with a flap of its wings.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"…That's all you have to say, after all that? I guess this hollow soul business is pretty serious."

Echidna couldn't help feeling incredulous when she heard Volcanica repeating those same tired old lines. Anastasia seemed to share her feelings, but Emilia was different.

Volcanica's breath had driven off the shadow for them. However, something else was making Emilia's chest throb.

"Lady Emilia? Did something happen? Are you hurt…?"

"No, I'm fine! It's Beatrice…!"

Guided by the roiling unease building inside her, Emilia called out to Beatrice, whom she held in her arms. The girl was stiff with tension, and her large eyes were opened wide.

"Emilia, go back downstairs! Right now! Subaru is…"

"Ngh! Okay—please behave, Volcanica! We're going to check the green room really quick!"

Still carrying Beatrice, Emilia immediately set off at a run. Realizing something must be wrong, Julius and Anastasia quickly followed.

They rushed down the long, winding stairs that connected the first and second floors…

"Oh, you're all here. Is everything okay? The tower was shaking a lot earlier."

“Meili! Are you hurt?”

Along the way, they ran into a familiar face.

“I’m fine,” Meili answered in her usual singsong voice, “I was just about to come find you… There was a bit of a problem.”

“A problem…with Subaru and the others?”

When Meili nodded, Emilia gasped and hurried even faster toward the green room. Once they’d reached the passage leading to their goal on the fourth floor, the problem became clear.

Subaru, Ram, and the others who were exhausted from the fighting were supposed to be recovering in the green room—which was now unreachable due to a collapsed hallway. The walls were torn asunder, and the passage was now exposed to the outside.

Volcanica had blown away the shadow, but just before it’d been erased, the shadow had reached this location, and the terrible destruction it had wrought was still visible.

“This is… Ah, Ram!”

As a thick dust cloud filled the air, Emilia found Ram slumped against the wall. A black land dragon was nestled beside her. For the most part, both looked safe.

“Ram! And Patlash, too. Thank goodness… You aren’t injured, are you?”

“Lady…Emilia…”

Clearly still recovering, Ram answered in a weak voice. Her frail reply made Emilia gasp, and she followed Ram’s gaze to where the green room was supposed to be.

There was nothing there.

The vines and plants that had been pulled away from the floor and walls still hung there, but the occupants of the room…

“Ram… Where are Subaru and Rem? They’re safe, right?”

“That’s…”

“No…!”

Emilia’s amethyst eyes went wide at Ram’s reluctant response. She rushed over to the big hole, ready to dive into the collapsed section of the tower.

“Will you wait a moment, I wonder?!” Beatrice tugged forcefully at her arm. “It’s too dangerous, Emilia! And you won’t find Subaru no matter how much you look!”

“That’s…! Don’t say that, Beatrice! It’s Subaru. I’m sure he hung on to something and he’s safe…”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t safe! But he isn’t *here*!”

Emilia had been dragging Beatrice along with ease, but that last comment gave her pause. She spun around with bewildered eyes.

"What do you mean, he isn't here? Did he manage to get away…?"

"No, Lady Emilia."

Julius, who had managed to catch up with them, shook his head at her question. Like Emilia had just done, he peered through the gaping hole in the tower's wall.

"The shadow earlier…that was the dark element… I believe it is similar in essence to Shamak. Lady Beatrice, as a great spirit with an affinity for the dark element, what is your opinion?"

"Your assessment isn't wrong. Shamak is…essentially an isolation spell. And that's what swallowed up Subaru. The shadow's master apparently tried to whisk Subaru away somewhere. But it failed, I suppose."

"Failed as in… Ah! Because of Volcanica's breath?"

Emilia's eyes shot open as Beatrice and Julius both nodded.

The dark menace that had borne down on the tower had swallowed up Subaru and Rem in the green room. However, right as it had managed to do that, Volcanica's breath had driven off the shadow.

"Wait, wait, wait. Then what happened? There's no trace of the shadow anymore, so…" Anastasia trailed off as she considered the worst-case scenario.

"They're not dead. I'm sure of it."

Ram stated this with absolute confidence as she stood up with Patlash's support. She touched the spot on her forehead where her horn had once been and blinked, as if to say that was how she knew.

"An oni's…or maybe I should say a sister's bond? So you're still connected with Rem?"

"Yes, that's correct. Rem is still alive… Barusu is another matter."

"Subaru is safe, too! Betty can guarantee that!"

Beatrice went red in the face as she shouted this indignantly. She was contracted to Subaru, so her words held just as much weight as Ram's.

It was unknown where Subaru and Rem had gone, but they were both still alive.

"Natsuki's spirit says he's safe, and Rem's twin says she's safe.

But is there any concrete proof?"

"It might be premature to say they're safe, I imagine, but…can you tell anything about his condition with that link?"

"…At the very least, his life is not currently in danger. I can't sense anything concerning, I suppose."

Beatrice answered Anastasia with a confident shake of her head. In this situation, even that tidbit of information was incredibly reassuring.

Emilia touched her chest, trying to calm her racing heart.

"…Emilia, here."

"Eh?"

Anastasia suddenly offered a white handkerchief to Emilia. Emilia took it without thinking but wasn't sure why Anastasia thought she needed it.

"You haven't noticed? You're crying… It probably hit you when you heard he was still alive."

"…Oh, wow."

Touching her cheek, Emilia realized that there were tears flowing from her eyes. She quickly wiped them with the handkerchief.

"Mrgh," she sniffled. "S-sorry… Even though everyone else is also dealing with this, I…"

"You don't have to apologize. He's your precious knight. And it's not like I'd be any different if I was in your shoes."

"To hear you say as much is an incomparable joy, Lady Anastasia… Lady Emilia, I am sure Subaru feels the same."

"…Yes, thank you."

Sniffling again, Emilia thanked Anastasia and Julius.

It was far too soon to find comfort in the relief she was feeling. And they still didn't know where Subaru and Rem had ended up, or what condition they were in. Even so, she couldn't stop the emotions from welling up inside her.

"So what now? It's nice that you were so happy you cried when you heard that Mister and that sleeping lady are still alive, but… where did they go?"

Trying to be supportive in her own way, Meili asked the most pressing question while she played with the little red scorpion on her head.

Emilia looked up and said, "You're right."

She was sure Subaru and Rem were the ones who wanted to cry

most. Bawling her eyes out wouldn't help anyone.

"We have to find them as soon as possible… Beatrice, Ram… can you tell where Subaru and Rem ended up?" she pleaded earnestly.

"_____"

Beatrice and Ram looked at each other, and then, after a few moments' silence…

"—South, I suppose."

"Agreed. I cannot say exactly how far they've gone, but…it's very far."

They both pointed in the same direction—south. Emilia turned that way as well. Far to the south of the Auguria dunes, which were at the easternmost edge of every world map. They would have to find and reunite with Subaru and Rem as soon as possible.

"Everything is always so hard for Subaru… We have to find him quickly, or he might cry."

"Lady Emilia, Subaru is not that frail…"

"No, that's not what I mean… I just know he'll be crying by himself."

Julius had simply wanted to stand up for his friend, but Emilia's reply made him freeze up. The others reacted the same way to her words.

Subaru liked to put up a strong front and was stubborn beyond belief, so he always tried to bear everything on his own, even if it meant enduring terrible hardship. Even when it would have been fine to cry, he wouldn't allow himself to do so.

That was why Emilia wanted to find him as soon as possible. She didn't want him to be alone if and when he reached his limit. She wanted to be by his side, so that her knight would never have to cry alone.

"Emilia…"

"I know, Beatrice. My heart is *really*, *really* on edge. But I can't help Subaru by getting worked up here… I have to stay calm."

Her eyes still red, Emilia slapped her cheeks and gave Beatrice a nod.

Forging ahead when your heart felt uneasy—that was how Emilia's knight did things. That was how he brought the future he wanted closer to becoming reality…

"Subaru and Rem are together, right?"

"…Given that Lady Beatrice and I both feel a pull from the

same direction, that seems likely."

"I see… In that case, I'm sure Subaru will protect Rem no matter what, so we don't have to worry about her. I am a little worried for Subaru, though."

He would surely keep her safe no matter the cost, even if it meant neglecting to care for himself. That was a bad habit of his.

Emilia clutched her hands in front of her chest, as if in prayer.

"Subaru, please be okey-dokey together with Rem."

CHAPTER 1

BAPTISM

1

At around the same time that Emilia offered up her prayer to the skies above the dry desert…

"_____"

On a windswept meadow in a distant land, a boy hugged a girl close.

The boy had black hair and an unfriendly demeanor. With his beady eyes and generally unpleasant countenance, some might have gone as far as to say he had the face of a killer.

However, right now, the boy had a tender look in his eyes, and there was the faintest trace of a smile on his lips. He looked like he was on the verge of tears, and it was all he could do to keep his vision from growing fuzzy.

That much was only natural.

How long had he waited for this moment? After all those heartache-filled days, how could he look away from the girl in front of him for even an instant?

As he carefully propped her up, their faces were close, and the girl with bright-blue hair stared right into his eyes.

She slowly blinked, her adorable face and big, round eyes showing faint signs of consciousness. She almost looked like she was half asleep, which wasn't far from the truth.

She had only just woken from a long, long slumber. Her mind was still stirring, and it made perfect sense that she wasn't fully aware of her surroundings yet.

"…He…ro…"

With a trembling voice, she repeated what the boy in front of

her had said.

The boy—Subaru Natsuki—nodded over and over.

“Yeah, that’s right, Rem. I’m your hero. I’ll always…”

“_____”

“Rem?”

While trying to control the quivering in his own voice, Subaru strained to hear Rem’s.

Perhaps because her throat was dry, she struggled to speak. Even so, her lips kept moving, so he leaned in close, listening carefully so as not to miss a word.

That Rem was trying to say something—that she was moving like this at all—made him so happy he trembled all over.

“—m.”

“What? Take as long as you need, Rem. What are…”

He was about to continue asking her what she wanted to say but trailed off partway through as he brought his ear close to Rem’s lips. But while he was focused on making out her faint words, his head and jaw were caught in two outstretched hands.

Subaru fell backward with an awkward shout, his voice cracking.

But even that…

“…R-Rem?”

Their positions were flipped. Now Rem was straddling him.

Bewildered by the sudden change, Subaru was slow to react. Rem stared straight down at him, her blue eyes looking him up and down.

And then she spoke quietly.

“Who is Rem?”

“_____”

“And what is this random talk of heroes all of a sudden? It makes absolutely no sense! Who are you?!”

Pinning Subaru’s shoulders with her knees, Rem put her hands around Subaru’s throat. Subaru struggled to breathe as she held him down with her body weight. He flailed his legs, but Rem was a master of restraint techniques. There was no way for him to regain control.

“Ghk! Aaah, gah…”

“If you won’t speak, then I will simply wait until you do. It does not matter how long it takes. Now answer me. What is your goal? What are you after?!”

Whether it was intentional or not, though, she was using too much force, and her grip around Subaru's neck kept him from answering.

Subaru desperately kicked his legs. He was about to be strangled to death.

This was their long-awaited reunion, even though he was the only one of them who knew it. He refused to let things end like this.

Even if she didn't remember anything about him.

"Aaauuh!"

"Aaah?!"

Suddenly, someone leaped in and slammed into Rem from the side. That said, it would have been more accurate to say that whoever it was got tangled up and fell onto the grass along with Rem.

Freed from the weight pinning him down, Subaru rolled onto his side and started coughing. It was for an entirely different reason now that his eyes were watering as he looked over at Rem, who had fallen over.

That was when he noticed the young girl clinging to Rem.

"Uuuh! Uuuh!"

"Wh-what are you…? Please, stop! This is not the time for this…"

The moment he saw the blond girl clinging to Rem, red-faced and with teeth bared, Subaru's mind went blank.

Before he realized it, he was rushing over to them.

"Get away from Rem, you asshole!"

“Aaah, uuuh!!!”

He knocked away the hand, which was grabbing at Rem’s hair, then immediately put the Archbishop, Louis Arneb, in a full nelson, and dragged her away from Rem.

Gluttony struggled, but flailing around with her arms and legs seemed to be all she could do to resist. While he found this incredibly suspect, Subaru continued to move the danger away from Rem.

“Auuuh! Uuh, uuuuh!”

“What’s with you…? C’mon, behave! Rem, are you all right?! Nothing happened, right?!”

“N-nothing happened. If anything, I should be asking you…”

Rem’s lovely eyebrows arched in confusion as she replied. She was still watching Subaru with suspicion as she slowly started to rise…

“…Huh?”

Her knees buckled without warning, and she fell right onto her bottom.

Subaru’s eyes shot open at the unnatural way Rem had fallen, but she didn’t notice. She was too preoccupied with checking her knees and trying to stand up again.

However…

“…Don’t tell me you can’t stand?” Subaru asked woodenly.

“N-no, of course I… This…this is…”

Rem immediately responded, still trying to get her legs to work. However, the harder she tried, the worse the situation became.

It was almost like her thoughts couldn’t reach her legs.

“Is it possible your legs got weaker because you were asleep for so long? But your arms didn’t feel any weaker.”

Subaru seemed even more panicked about Rem’s condition than she was, and his eyes spun as he watched her struggle to stand.

It was a common-enough story. Many who had long hospital stays lost a great deal of muscle mass due to a lack of exercise. It wasn’t rare to hear that it had caused weakness in the legs, or to need a few weeks of rehabilitation to be able to stand and walk again. But it seemed odd that it would only affect the lower body.

Rem had been bedridden for over a year. Any resulting weakness should have affected her whole body. This sort of

imbalanced condition was most likely due to…

"…The feedback from Bis Sis fighting earlier?"

As he tried to figure out what could possibly be wrong, that thought crossed his mind.

Ram had fought hard against Lye Batenkaitos, another Archbishop of Gluttony. Because of Subaru's weakness, Ram had been forced to use her trump card—sharing the burden of her power with her sister.

Ram had been a prodigy since childhood and would have gone on to become one of the strongest beings alive had she kept her horn. That was the level of power she had unleashed in that fight, and Rem had endured the strain of it while still unconscious.

After getting a small taste of the burden Ram carried, Subaru knew just how terrible that must have been for Rem.

What Subaru had taken on was just a fragment of the burden Ram always carried. Even that had been enough to make Subaru feel like he'd pulled several all-nighters in a row. In addition to incredible exhaustion, he'd been hit with a fever and nausea.

Meanwhile, Rem had taken on a far greater load than him, but without any way of bracing herself for it. He remembered back in the green room what Ram had said about not knowing what might happen when she shared the weight of her full power with Rem.

If that was the reason why Rem couldn't stand up now, then…

"…It's all my fault."

Ram would have immediately berated him if she'd heard those words coming out of his mouth. But Subaru had failed to finish what he had started, and as a result, Ram had pushed herself to the limit. Assuming that was the cause of Rem's current condition, he fully considered it his fault.

Now that their comrades were nowhere to be found, and with Louis hanging around in a strange state for some reason, that responsibility weighed on him even more heavily.

"Your fault…? What did you do to me?!"

"Wait, that's not what I meant…"

"Also, I must ask again! Who are you, and who am I?!"

Rem glared at Subaru as she pounded at the legs that refused to move. Rage swirled wildly in her eyes.

Her pained demand that almost verged on a tantrum confirmed Subaru's unpleasant hunch. A bitter taste filled his mouth.

Rem had asked who she was.

It was painful that she didn't recognize him. But for her to not even know herself was almost too much for Subaru to bear, given how long he had wished for this reunion.

Of course, he had already suspected as much because of how she had been talking.

"…These are the same symptoms that Crusch had."

Ever since her name and memories were stolen from her, Rem had been sleeping.

There were two more ways Gluttony's victims could end up. Those who had their names stolen were forgotten by the people around them, like Julius. And those who had their memories stolen forgot themselves. That was what had happened to Crusch.

Rem had woken up with no memories and no idea what was happening.

The first people she'd seen were a guy with the face of a thug, and a little girl who could only make strange noises. And to top it all off, she couldn't move her own legs. It was perfectly understandable that she would be confused.

"Uuaauh!"

Apparently exhausted from struggling, Louis had stopped fighting, and at some point managed to slip out of Subaru's arms, which had gone loose. She landed on the ground and let out a shout. After rubbing her bottom, Louis rolled over.

Paying her no attention, Subaru slowly walked over to Rem instead.

As he approached, Rem remained on guard. The look in her eyes reminded Subaru of the first time they'd met.

Once they'd started getting along, she had stuck so close to him that it was easy to forget how shy and careful Rem was around strangers. Overcoming that initial hurdle had been surprisingly difficult.

With Ram, on the other hand, he got the same treatment from her both before and after he'd gotten to know her better, which was easier to deal with, in a sense.

Though that invited the scary thought that Subaru had simply not become friends with Ram at all.

"Well, never mind Big Sis for now… Hey there."

"Wh-what? I should warn you, if you intend to do something to me, I… "

"…You're Rem."

“Huh?”

Her face had been incredibly tense, but suddenly she looked almost dumbfounded.

Subaru came to a stop just outside her reach.

“Rem. That’s your name.”

Rem fell silent, unable to hide her confusion. But he could see her red tongue moving slightly as she repeated *Rem* to herself, as though she wanted to confirm the shape of the name with her mouth.

“If I’m being honest, I don’t really know exactly what happened, either. But we got separated from our friends and wound up in a place I don’t recognize. You should be able to understand that’s not ideal, right?”

“Well…”

Still confused, Rem’s eyes glanced around the meadow they were in.

A breeze blew across the grass, and the sun was high in the sky. The temperature was comfortable. There was a humidity in the air that was nothing like that of the arid Auguria dunes.

They had to be someplace completely different for the change in weather to be this stark.

“_____”

Subaru didn’t want to worry Rem when she already had her lost memory to deal with and had no idea what was happening. That was why he’d decided to conceal the myriad doubts and worries that were taking root in his mind.

It was clear Subaru, Rem, and Louis had been caught up in some sort of teleportation phenomenon.

The scenery and climate made it clear they had been sent someplace far from Auguria. If the cause of that was the shadow that had attacked the tower, then there was a chance Emilia and the others had been affected as well.

Subaru was totally exhausted, and Rem had originally been bedridden. They were undoubtedly the weakest members of their party, and they were currently safe, so he wanted to trust that Emilia and the others were also fine. However…

“It doesn’t look like there’s much hope of reuniting with our buddies anytime soon. We’ll have to make do by ourselves for the time being. So…”

“So…what? What would you have me do? I can barely move

my own legs."

"…I imagine this is gonna sound real suspicious, but all you need to do is stay right there. Seeing you breathing, talking, and looking around us is more than enough."

"What? Do you mean I should keep an eye out for potential danger?"

"Not exactly, but that works, too."

Rem was awake, alert, and active. Subaru couldn't be happier.

It was a small wish, but what Subaru had wanted more than anything was for Rem to be well. That was the simple truth.

Of course, he still wanted to figure out a way to recover her memories, and also find a way to meet back up with Emilia, Beatrice, and the others. The sooner, the better. He wanted to reunite Rem and Ram.

For Ram's sake. For the girl who cared so much about the sister she couldn't remember.

"Could you just trust me here? Please? I'll protect you even if it costs me my life… Well, I guess if it *actually* costs me my life, there's not much point, but I'll put my life on the line to keep you safe. Promise. So…"

"…Supposing I were willing to accept your request, what do you plan to do?"

"Right. I can't just start rushing around without a plan, so we should settle on a course of action."

They were sitting in the middle of a big, open meadow, but a tree line was visible in the distance. They seemed to be in a large clearing in a forest.

Frankly, venturing into a forest in unfamiliar lands was nothing but a massive risk, but…

"The number one rule when you are lost in a forest is letting people know where you are using GPS, but…"

"'Jee Pee Ess'…?"

"I know, we don't have that here… But I'm connected with Beako through our contract, so in a sense, I'm our GPS."

And it was possible Rem and Ram's connection could serve the same purpose.

If so, both could guide their friends in the right direction.

"The next priority is finding a source of water. Clean water is crucial. Then we pick the best campsite, and from there, we steadily explore our surroundings. As for edible plants and fruits… I was

right to learn all that from Clind. Three cheers for Teach…”

While Subaru was learning how to parkour and use a whip, Clind had also taught him all sorts of techniques and other knowledge. Subaru had had plenty of complaints while studying under that butler who could apparently do everything, but thanks to that training, he knew what to do in this situation.

In any case…

“There’s other things we can try, but we can’t move without a plan. Understand?” Subaru smiled reassuringly.

“…To some extent. Even if I wanted to resist, my current condition won’t let me.”

“…I think you just said the quiet part out loud.”

Rem’s response was not exactly a vote of confidence. Having lost her memories, she had very little reason to trust Subaru. If she could walk on her own, there was a good chance she would’ve already booked it.

A small part of him considered it oddly fortunate that her body wasn’t currently in tip-top shape. Of course, he felt a bit guilty the moment that thought crossed his mind.

“Hopefully you’ll be able to move your legs soon.”

“Wha?! You can say whatever you’d like, that won’t change anything. Anyway, what are you going to do?”

“I told you, finding water comes first. There’s the problem of your legs, too, so I would appreciate it if you don’t fight me on this…”

Once he’d taken that one last step toward her, Subaru turned around and crouched. Rem could tell what he was trying to do.

“You plan to carry me on your back?”

“Carrying you in my arms is technically an option, but I won’t last long that way. It would be helpful for me if you’re willing to ride piggyback.”

“_____”

For a few moments, Rem stared at Subaru’s pathetic face in silence. Then, sighing, she slowly reached out for his back. Once her arms were wrapped around his chest and secure, Subaru carefully stood up. He could feel her weight—she felt terribly light.

He’d had many chances to carry her while she was sleeping over the past year, and each time, he’d realized how difficult it could be to carry someone who was unconscious.

This was different. Rem was holding on to him of her own will.

“Hmm? Did something happen?”

“No, I’m just feeling oddly moved. Now then, time to search for water.”

“Before that…what about that girl?”

“…Right.”

When Rem pointed with her chin over his shoulder, he also looked in that direction, recalling their other problem.

Louis was still rolling around and rubbing her bottom, her long, blond hair a complete mess.

What do I do with this strange Archbishop?

“_____”

Even Subaru could tell that her current state was unnatural.

She wasn’t really someone anyone would have called “normal” to begin with, but that was because of her viciousness, not this apparent mental regression to infancy.

If anything, she had been far smarter than most would have assumed based on her childlike form, and she’d been fully capable of exploiting even the finest cracks in people’s hearts.

That was before. Now…

“Aah, aauuh.”

She had licked Subaru’s face when he was waking up, and she made funny noises like a baby, and threw tantrums like one, too. Something dramatic must have happened.

However…

“Is that enough to get me to feel any sympathy?”

She was unforgivably evil. That fact was unshakable.

In the final moments of their confrontation in the corridors of memory, Louis had experienced Return by Death and suffered a terrible mental shock. It had left her terrified not just of Subaru, but of the entire world.

At that point, she’d devolved into nothing more than a pitiful girl.

But Subaru had chosen not to save her. And he’d felt no desire to save her, either.

Louis had had any number of opportunities to do things differently, but always took the most inhumane option. In the end, she’d painted herself into a corner and lost her chance to change.

Her two brothers were no different.

Louis Arneb had committed an unforgivable sin, fallen into the depths of hell, and ultimately, transformed into a simple beast.

Why should I have to save someone like that?

"Are you not going to help her?"

"…It's complicated. She wound up here with us, but she isn't one of our friends. If anything, she's the exact opposite. I'm not against just leaving her behind."

"_____"

He noticed Rem's breath catching in her throat as he passed judgment on Louis. But it didn't change his answer.

"Honestly, we should leave her behind… It's not just that she would hold us back—she's a bomb. I can't go around carrying something like that."

It had been an error in judgment from the moment he'd grabbed Louis while the shadow was closing in. Maybe he and Rem wouldn't have been sent so far away if he hadn't picked her up.

Keeping her around is all risk and no reward.

"Is that your final answer?"

"Yeah, you heard me right. I'm not going to say I won't lose any sleep over it, but…"

Rem was his top priority. Subaru's own well-being came next. He couldn't lose sight of what was truly important. That was why he ignored Louis lying next to him, and headed off in the opposite direction, toward the forest—

"It seems I was right to trust my instincts, hollow as I currently am."

The voice that spoke was awfully cold and harsh.

Subaru gasped when Rem whispered these words in his ear. But he couldn't formulate any other response because her slender arms were pressing on his neck.

Rem was strangling Subaru from behind.

"Gah…!"

"You tried to get me to lower my guard with pretty words, and then you abandoned that girl. How can I trust someone like that? Don't take me for a fool."

Unlike her legs, the arms crushing his neck had the full strength of an oni.

Unable to peel them away, Subaru fell backward, struggling to breathe. But even with Subaru lying on top of her, Rem's grip didn't loosen. She was thoroughly choking him out.

He thrashed about with his legs and tried to roll over, but Rem was too strong. As the seconds ticked by, Subaru's own strength

flagged.

"Ga…aaa…gh."

As he lost the ability to struggle, the question of why Rem had turned on him filled his head. And as that question mark filled his oxygen-starved brain, Rem quietly exhaled with a mix of distrust and loathing:

"It was obvious you were up to no good, with such a wicked stench coming off you."

That was when Subaru remembered.

The first time they'd met, Rem had suspected Subaru was a threat, and the biggest reason for that was not that he'd made an awful first impression, nor was it his naturally off-putting gaze.

No—it was the scent of the Witch.

Even without her memories, even without anything to rely on but herself, Rem could still sense it.

That was the biggest reason why Rem distrusted him.

Subaru had realized that too late…

"—Ah."

He desperately willed his body to move, trying to explain himself, but it was pointless.

Subaru's consciousness slowly, slowly faded into the abyss.

He screamed, not wanting to just die at Rem's hands like this.

But his screams did not make a sound.

2

"Ngh! Rem?!"

Suddenly coming to, Subaru sat up with a jolt.

As he did, he began coughing because of a painful lump in his throat, hacking up phlegm as he forced himself to settle down and look around.

He was in a meadow—he had been sprawled in the middle of it.

It was a familiar way to wake up, but Subaru quickly realized this was not the déjà vu of coming back from death—he couldn't see Rem or Louis anywhere nearby.

"This is…definitely the place we were sent to. I…nghh."

Recalling what had just happened earlier, he gingerly touched his neck, and the pain brought back an unpleasant memory.

While carrying Rem on his back, Subaru had been choked to death—well, not quite.

“My neck hurts like hell…which means Rem didn’t kill me.”

She had strangled him but stopped short of killing him.

Surprised by her decision given how cold her voice had sounded, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief, then quickly reminded himself that it was too soon to relax.

He was still alive. That meant he would have to pick things up from that last terrible development.

Because of the lingering scent of the Witch, Rem harbored serious doubts about Subaru and had run away with the worst possible impression of him. Since Louis was also missing, he assumed Rem had taken her along.

Left behind here, he had effectively forced Rem to be alone with an incredibly dangerous individual.

“Damn it! The hell am I doing…?!”

Bitter about his series of mistakes, Subaru slapped his cheeks and stood up.

Based on where the sun was in the sky, not much time had passed. He still didn’t want to think of it as a good thing, but Rem would have trouble moving.

He was sure she wouldn’t get very far on those legs.

“I can see the marks from her dragging herself across the grass…! I can follow her!”

It would have been hopeless if he’d had to track her without any clues, but the tracks she’d left after dragging herself across the meadow were still visible. There was no telling how far they would take him, though.

“I’ve taken plenty of risky gambles already!”

That was hardly anything to brag about, but even so, Subaru sprinted off across the meadow, following the tracks in the grass.

Fortunately, they didn’t suddenly end, and he was able to make out where the two of them had entered the forest. The lush and dense plant growth underneath the canopy of tall trees made it look like a tropical rainforest.

Upon closer examination, it was obvious he was sweating from the heat and humidity. This climate was nothing like the bone-dry desert they had just come from.

The big leaves and vibrant vines reminded him of jungles like the Amazon, though he had never been there himself. From what he’d heard, the Amazon was supposed to be a deadly place for anyone who wandered in unprepared, but…

“If that’s where Rem went, then I’ve got no choice.”

Subaru and Rem were equally unprepared for venturing deep into the forest. As he imagined Rem desperately fleeing into the forest despite her uncooperative legs, he couldn’t help berating himself for every rash choice he’d made so far.

“Rem! Please come out! Please! I made a mistake!”

He hesitated for just a moment, and then, praying that Rem was still safe, he boldly dived into the woods, calling out in a loud voice.

His feet sank into the soft ground and endless undergrowth. The chirps of insects he had never heard before and the rustling of the plants he pushed past were loud and annoying, so he raised his voice again.

Of course, he realized that calling out to her like this might scare Rem and make her actively avoid him. But it was better than wandering lost through the forest without any clues or markers to rely on.

And more than anything, he had to do something productive, or the self-loathing he felt would make his heart explode.

After all the things everyone had done for Rem’s sake, if anything happened to her now, how would Subaru ever make it up to her?

He couldn’t even atone with his own death.

“Rem! Where are you?! Please answer me! I’m begging you, don’t leave me!!!”

He shouted through the trees, not caring how hoarse his voice got.

It didn’t take long for his limbs to start feeling like lead. He was fighting a losing battle against immense exhaustion. Thinking back, he had only managed to catch a couple hours of sleep to recover after the hard fighting at the Pleiades Watchtower.

The spirit in the green room increased the natural recovery rate of anyone under its care, but that was a drop in the ocean.

If Subaru wasn’t careful, he might collapse in relief the moment he found Rem.

Wary of such a stupid possibility coming to pass, Subaru pressed on with his search in the rainforest…

“Rem! Please answer! I’m begging you! I’m sorry! I was wrong!”

Putting his hands to his mouth, he continued to shout.

He pleaded with her from the bottom of his heart, but there was

no response, and his spirit was flagging.

He continued to chase after a phantom of Rem, keeping his eyes peeled as he moved past tree after tree.

“_____”

Just as he was about to shout her name for the umpteenth time, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

The slightest trace of movement. Something peeked out from the underbrush, in a gap between the trees. It wasn’t just a breeze rustling the leaves—

“Re—”

Getting his hopes up, Subaru turned in that direction.

That was the exact moment something slammed into his chest with tremendous speed.

“Gh?!”

Before he could so much as shout, he was knocked off his feet and sent flying backward. He crashed into a tree trunk, and the wind was knocked out of him.

“Gah… Wh-what the…?!”

His brain was scrambled by the sudden impact. He looked around, but considering the sheer force of it, he’d obviously been attacked. Before he had a chance to gather his thoughts, he tried to make a run for it.

But he couldn’t, because—

“Agh?”

The thick arrow sticking out of his chest had punched a hole right through him and come out the other side, pinning him to the big tree trunk behind him.

“Gh, bluh…”

As soon as he realized what had happened, he coughed up all the blood that was welling up in his throat.

He was bleeding profusely, both inside and out, and it wasn't stopping. Coughing up more blood than air, Subaru struggled to breathe.

"Kgh…"

Despite the terrible pain, he grabbed the arrow in his chest and tried to pull it out.

It didn't even budge. The arrowhead was buried solidly in the tree, preventing him from moving at all.

Whoever had shot him must've used a heavy bow to achieve such extraordinary force, enough to pin him down like an insect specimen. All he could do now was struggle pathetically…

"Agh, uggh, hng, nghh…"

When he wasn't choking on his blood, he continued to call out to the girl who should still have been somewhere in the woods. He could no longer form words, but all the same, he tried to warn her of the menace lurking in the woods.

There was someone out there—specifically, the person walking toward him with a bow and arrow.

The quiet sound of Subaru drowning in his own blood was slowly muffled by the rustling footsteps of the approaching hunter, who had come to confirm the death of their prey.

They were slender and tall. An arrow was nocked in their bow. Everything else was lost to the darkness—Subaru couldn't make out anything else.

By their hand, Subaru had pathetically, helplessly failed to reach Rem, and…

"—em."

They're right in front of me. An enemy. Are they the enemy? Why? What's going on? What do I do?

What can I do with no one to rely on?

The welling heat and the pain he had been all too slow to notice were steadily spreading through his body. Blood was dripping from his eyes, nose, and ears now.

A feeling of emptiness was growing, a harbinger of a cold death's approach. Subaru desperately kept his eyes open and called out to her until the very end.

He called her name with his very last breath.

Even as blood spilled from his lips.

Over and over, he called and called and called, until his very last moment.

Calling—

3

The next instant, Subaru's consciousness rose from the darkness.

"Gagh!"

The agony of drowning he'd been experiencing just moments earlier vanished in an instant, only to be replaced by the pain of his erratic breathing and the unmistakable feeling of the ground under his back.

"*Cough*, *cough*. Ack, bleugh."

Subaru sat up while rubbing his throat, recalling what had just transpired.

He peered down at his chest and couldn't see an arrow anywhere. Additionally, the scratches he'd gotten from pushing through the underbrush were gone as well.

Of course they were.

He had suffered a terrible blow right through his chest.

"I…died…"

With a shudder and the unshakable feeling that the ground had fallen out from under him, Subaru's blood turned cold.

After the Pleiades Watchtower was swallowed up by shadow, he'd been carried far, far away, and been awake for not even an hour before abruptly losing his life.

As it dawned on him how dangerous the situation was, Subaru stood up on wobbly feet. He steadied himself and looked around him.

"Damn it. Of course it's like this…"

He was in the middle of a big meadow, and as luck would have it, he couldn't see the one person he was hoping would be there.

Unmistakably, it was the same meadow where he had ended up after being whisked away from the tower. The problem was, Rem and Louis were nowhere to be found. Meaning Subaru's reset point was—

"Right after Rem strangled me…!"

He was starting over from the exact moment after Rem had knocked him out.

It was fortunate that he hadn't ended up at a point before Rem

had woken up, or at a point that would undo their victory at the Pleiades Watchtower. That said, a small part of him had hoped he might be able to talk to Shaula again had he returned to that final part of the previous loop.

"What am I, stupid? Yeah, I guess I am."

If you're gonna keep clinging to that, then you should have made more time to listen to her, to be with her, to ask her how she felt. You didn't, though, so you don't have the right to grieve now.

"Right now, I have to focus on finding Rem."

He needed to chase after her and clear up the misunderstanding.

If Rem's distrust was due to the lingering scent of the Witch, then the smell might have become even stronger after yet another instance of Return by Death. But even if that made her less willing to trust him, he still had to protect her.

"Someone in that forest killed me… That wasn't Rem's handiwork."

She had already strangled him once. It was entirely possible she might attack him again. But there shouldn't have been enough time for her to find or make a bow and arrows, never mind learn how to use them.

"If my attacker could nail me that accurately from a good distance away, it could be dangerous for Rem, too."

Since her legs were currently out of commission, she wouldn't be able to flee if that archer came after her. He had to find her first, even if she didn't believe he was her ally.

"Let's do this, Subaru Natsuki. Lemme see just how great you are."

He slapped his cheeks to clear his mind of that shocking death and the grief of being hated by a girl he cared about so much. It wasn't clear if he could convince her to stick together even if he found her, but he had to take this one step at a time.

Grief and anger were things you could only feel while still alive.

"_____"

Once he'd taken a deep breath, Subaru looked for Rem's tracks in the grass, then charged into the jungle once more. This time, though, he was deeply unsure whether he should raise his voice and call out to Rem.

The archer's baptism earlier had happened because the enemy had found Subaru defenseless. Their identity was unclear, as was

their goal, but having killed him in one shot, it was difficult to imagine that they were friendly. He should assume that being discovered would mean death.

"But a bow and arrow means it's not a demon beast. It's gotta be a person."

There was a chance he could avoid a fight to the death, depending on how negotiations went. Whether they would be willing to sit down and talk was another question, though.

All of Subaru's deaths had more or less been caused equally by demon beasts and people. People might even have had the edge. Just because the opponent was someone he could communicate with didn't necessarily mean it would be possible to make friends.

It would be easier to find Rem with more people helping him, but…

"Cor Leonis."

Closing his eyes, Subaru swept away all extraneous thoughts and activated the authority that lay within him. The new power that he had used to go wild in the Pleiades Watchtower, Cor Leonis, allowed Subaru to locate allies nearby as long as they were willing to support the Little King.

He had hoped it would let him find Rem, but…

"…Nope, there's no response. Either she's insanely far away, or she doesn't consider me an ally."

He didn't know the exact range of Cor Leonis, but when it was active, a faint light marked the location of his allies. Sadly, he couldn't see any lights now, and he concluded that this was either due to distance or the state of their relationship.

At the moment, he also couldn't sense Emilia and the others who had previously been marked by his power. And even after he had gotten acquainted with Reid or Gluttony in the tower, it still never marked them.

Subaru quickly concluded that Emilia and the others must no longer be in range, and that Rem was in range but didn't think of him as an ally. His inability to track Louis was also consistent with this conclusion.

"I would never treat her like an ally in a million years. Anyway, looks like my one-sided feelings for Rem aren't enough for the radar to work."

He regretted all the misunderstandings that had given Rem the wrong impression.

With the Witch's scent all over him, maybe convincing Rem to trust him had been impossible from the start. Even so, he hadn't even bothered to pretend to take care of Louis, or to suggest bringing her along.

"Damn it, damn it… Why…?! Rem… Rem finally woke up, so why do I…?"

Why do I have to chase after her like this?

Even though he had waited so long for the day she could stand up and walk on her own two legs again, now that his wish had finally come true, it was causing him some awful trouble.

And thinking about who was to blame for all this, he felt nothing but rage at Louis and all the other Gluttonies.

"_____"

Subaru's thoughts were stuck in a loop as he carefully moved through the trees.

He crouched down as a desperate measure to evade the person who had killed him— *I'll call them the hunter for now.*

"Think, think… This is all my crafty head is good for. Rem's forgotten her memories and doesn't remember a thing. But she still had the ability to wrestle me to the ground and detect the Witch's scent. That's gotta be episodic memory loss."

Amnesia was a common trope in fiction, and in most cases, it tended to be some form of episodic memory loss. This generally manifested as being able to remember the names of things and retaining ingrained reflexes but failing to recall people or specific memories.

Based on the way Rem had spoken and how she'd doubted Subaru because of his scent, he was convinced.

"Rem's probably disoriented right now. She can't run forever. After getting some distance from me, she'll take some time to calm down and collect herself. And assuming she took Louis with her, that would be all the more reason to stop sooner rather than later."

It seemed like an insane thing to hope for, but he wanted Louis to slow Rem's flight down as much as possible. If she threw a tantrum, refused to keep walking, or just generally caused Rem problems, it would give Subaru a chance to catch up to them.

Or was it possible that Louis would become too much to handle and be abandoned by Rem…?

"…Hard to say."

He honestly wasn't sure if Rem was capable of abandoning

someone who looked like a defenseless little girl.

With her amnesia, Rem didn't even know who she was herself. She didn't have the inferiority complex toward Ram that had developed from a young age, or a concrete sense of self.

Ram's ability to stay composed as if nothing had happened even after losing Rem's existence was abnormal, but would that also be true of Rem? Without any sisterly bond, without the pride of being an oni or an inferiority complex because of her sister, and having absolutely no opinion about Subaru Natsuki, what would Rem…?

"Hgh!"

As he imagined it, it felt like flames were licking at his heart.

Subaru lurched forward, stepping on a twig that snapped with a loud crack. He almost slipped on the muddy ground underneath and ended up stumbling forward through the high grass.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, the woods opened up and he found himself in a clearing.

A scary thought entered his mind, and he quickly checked to see if he had been wandering through the rainforest all that time only to end up back in the same spot. After a careful study of his surroundings, he confirmed he was in a different clearing.

It was similar to the first meadow, but the grass here was taller. And the first meadow was surrounded by rainforest on all sides, but here there was only the jungle that he had stumbled out of.

Before him, all he could see was the horizon. The sky seemed impossibly high, and staring at it made him feel unsteady on his feet, as if he might get drawn up into it if he wasn't careful.

But what caught his attention most of all wasn't the sky. There was a spot in the meadow that had been cleared and was littered with camping tools…

Put simply, there were signs that someone had been here.

"_____"

Subaru's body tensed cautiously, and his field of view narrowed.

Fortunately, he couldn't spot anyone at the simple campsite—only the traces of someone making camp. It was hard to imagine this was an elaborate trap.

The question was, who had set up this campsite?

"The simplest answer would be…the person who killed me."

If the hunter was actively roaming the woods, then this was

probably their base camp.

Subaru realized he should immediately leave and get himself to safety.

Whether it was in the woods or a clearing, the hunter was undeniably a dangerous person to run into.

It was not unheard of for traditional hunters stalking the mountains to mistake a person for a deer and shoot them. But given the apparent skill of the hunter, it seemed impossible they'd mistaken him for a deer when he'd been shouting at the top of his lungs.

The hunter was a dangerous enemy. That was the premise Subaru needed to act on.

However…

"If I could snag at least a knife here…"

The underbrush was incredibly thick. He could really use a tool or two to make faster progress. Unfortunately, all he had on him was his trusty Guilty Whip, crafted from the remains of a powerful enemy.

The clothes he had for dealing with the desert were in a strange way still somewhat useful in a jungle, but having some kind of blade would make a dramatic improvement in his ability to cut through the foliage.

He just needed to get some kind of tool from this camp.

"There's signs of a fire, and it's rough…but I think that's a bed?"

He'd found the remains of a campfire and what looked like a mat of cut foliage beside it. Someone had spent time here for sure.

The camp was otherwise empty, and Subaru couldn't find anything noteworthy…

"If I could just find anything that can cut stuff…"

"Oh. Looking for a blade? You have shown up in quite the fortunate place, then."

While he scanned the campsite again in search of any tool that might be useful, a voice suddenly called out to Subaru from behind. He froze, feeling something cold pressed against his neck.

Careful to not even breathe, he slowly looked down and saw a beautifully polished sword resting against the right side of his neck.

"_____"

Subaru took a deep breath. He understood that his attacker had full control of this situation.

But at the same time, he was confused.

He had been on guard. His life was on the line, so he had been extremely vigilant.

There were superhumans in this world who could move so fast, his eyes wouldn't be able to keep up. And some could even effectively teleport.

"But come on… How unlucky do I have to be to run into one of those rarities here, of all places?"

"Fool. Who told you to speak? Choose your every word and move with caution. Do not forget that your life rests in my hands."

While Subaru was bemoaning his luck, the person behind him spoke mercilessly.

Subaru knew that if he tried anything, he would most likely lose his head. He frantically tried to think of some sort of way out.

Judging from their voice, his attacker was a man. Probably around the same age as Subaru, or maybe a little older. There was a distinctiveness to his word choice, but it didn't sound forced or unnatural.

And more than anything…

"It seems you are probing all of your knowledge while keeping your mouth closed. But you do not risk your life to attack. Hmmm… "

The man was perceptive enough to pick up on what Subaru was thinking just from his silence.

Evidently, he was contemplating something.

"An outfit ill-suited to Badheim's climate. Pale skin… You must not be a local."

"I-I… Whoa."

"Silence. Who told you to open your mouth? Bother me again, and you can see what it's like trying to speak out of turn with your head separated from your neck."

He put a shallow cut in Subaru's neck, indicating he had no intention of holding a conversation.

There was a twinge of pain, and a rivulet of blood trickled down Subaru's neck. Apparently, the man did not intend to end his examination of Subaru.

"That whip at your hip. Far too inconvenient to use in the rainforest. Arms and legs developed to a degree, but not enough to match a wolf… It seems you were not tracking me."

"_____"

“Why are you silent? Explain yourself. Or would you rather die here?”

“What?! *Now* I can talk?! Can’t you be a little more reasonable?!”

Subaru started to complain, but he could practically feel the intense gaze boring a hole in the back of his head. He stiffened, realizing he’d said something he probably shouldn’t have, but he finally breathed a sigh of relief when the blade at his neck was pulled away.

“Slowly turn around. If you attempt anything…”

“Off with my head?”

“No. I shall sever each of your limbs, carve out your heart, and burn it before your eyes.”

“That’s way too cruel!”

The threat was ghastly, so Subaru raised his hands to show he had no intention of resisting as he slowly turned around.

Then he took a careful look at the person who’d been standing behind him.

“…Seriously?”

He had locked eyes with a man whose face was covered by a rag wrapped around his head.

4

The man’s appearance was truly strange.

He was a bit taller than Subaru and seemed slender. He had long, lithe arms and legs, and he held a narrow saber in his hand, the one that had been at Subaru’s neck just a moment ago.

He was wearing clothes that gave him the air of a high noble, which was even more out of place for a walk in the woods than Subaru’s outfit. Looking closely, the rags wrapped around his face must have been part of his cloak originally.

It was unclear whether he had bandaged an injury or simply had a pressing reason to hide his identity, but…

“What is that imbecilic expression?”

“Imbecilic or not, people are born looking how they do, so isn’t that slander…? Plus, how could anyone help it when you look like that?”

“How dare you! Your eyes have almost convinced me that I should suspect you of being an assassin again.”

“Don’t decide people’s jobs from looking at their eyes! And my role is the exact opposite of an assassin. I’m not an attacker. If anything, I’m a protector.”

The masked man was watching him carefully, still on guard, with his sword pointed at Subaru.

While delivering this dubious answer, Subaru looked at the man’s equipment and then at the bag placed behind him and furrowed his brow. The man didn’t look prepared for camping and traveling in the jungle. And the bag behind him—it looked like it

had appeared out of nowhere, just like the masked man.

Finally, there was the masked man's weapon. It was obvious he did not have a bow or arrows.

"…I guess you aren't the hunter."

"Hunter?"

"Just talking to myself. Incidentally, though… You wouldn't happen to be able to teleport or make yourself invisible, would you?"

"Oh?"

The eyes peering through the man's mask lit up at that question.

It wasn't a sign of anger or him giving up on Subaru, though. His interest had been sparked.

"How did you come to such a conclusion? Speak your reason."

"…I was cautious in approaching this place. Of course, I know there are plenty of people who can move undetected around me, but you aren't one of them."

"Why not?"

"I hope it won't annoy you if I say this, but I've had a lot of opportunities to stumble across powerful people or what you might call superhumans. And compared to those guys who casually defy common sense, the feeling I get from you is…well, normal."

That sort of comment would definitely anger a warrior of a certain level. But Subaru was simply being honest about his impression of the stranger. The air about the man in front of him convinced Subaru that he knew his way around a sword, but only to the degree of a normal person who had a normal amount of training.

Compared to Reinhard, Garfiel, Wilhelm, and Julius, there wasn't much to say except that he was clearly inferior to them.

"That's why I ruled out you maneuvering behind me before I even noticed. Which leaves only teleporting behind me, or else…"

"Using concealment to make myself invisible. I see."

"Ngh?!"

The man standing in front of Subaru suddenly disappeared.

But that wasn't the only surprise.

"You disappeared…but you're still in front of me?"

"Correct. Concealment does not hide my presence."

To answer Subaru's question, the masked man appeared again, exactly as he'd been before.

He hadn't gone anywhere; he had just become invisible. And he'd returned the moment he answered Subaru's question.

"So it comes undone when someone touches you or notices you?"

"It is still the perfect tool for waiting quietly and hiding," the man said, before lowering his sword and nodding toward the campsite. "The bed is a lure. I was lying in wait further away. I saw you sneaking around from the beginning. A ridiculous sight."

"If you see someone being all cautious, of course they'll look silly… But forget that! If you're lowering your sword, that means…"

"You are not pursuing me. I know not why you are here or what your intentions are, but you are genuinely lost. In which case, I have no reason to loudly rebuke you or teach you a lesson with my blade."

Once he'd concluded they had no reason to fight, the masked man sheathed his sword.

Only now did Subaru finally let the tension drain from his body. And in the process, he remembered his original goal.

"This isn't the time for me to relax. Hey, sorry for asking more questions, but have you seen a blue-haired girl, by any chance? We got separated around here."

"Blue hair? No, not that I've seen. Indeed, yours is the first face I have seen since coming to this place. What are you going to do about that?"

"Nothing! Nothing, but…another swing and a miss? Hey, you wouldn't happen to be willing to help out with my search, would you…?"

"_____"

"Yeah, I figured."

No more information was forthcoming, and his request for help had been batted aside.

Under the man's cold gaze, Subaru turned back to the forest to begin his search for Rem again.

"Wait. If you were separated in the rainforest, then you will not simply stumble across each other again. Do you not think it would be better to prioritize your own survival?"

"…Sorry, but I can't do that. She's more precious than my life. I have to find her, have to bring her back no matter what."

"More precious… To hear that not in the song of a songstress but from the lips of a man, I can only assume those are empty

words.”

Subaru’s eyes gleamed. The man seemed to be scoffing at his recklessness.

“And yet your eyes are intriguing,” the man said, pointing at him.

Subaru recoiled, initially afraid he might get his eye poked out, only for the masked man to chuckle.

“Those eyes speak no falsehoods or lies. I do not know if your life truly hung in the balance, but at least here and now, you speak without deceit.”

“In that case… Actually, what does that mean? If what I’m saying is true, then—”

“—Then I am mildly intrigued. I will lend you my knowledge.”

The masked man tapped his temple.

Subaru wanted to yell at the man to quit messing around, but the words never left his mouth.

For some strange reason, he didn’t doubt the man. He was beyond suspicious, but there was a persuasiveness to him. His natural charisma, perhaps.

“Tell me the details of what happened. I shall devise a way to search for her.”

“…She and I were suddenly sent here.”

Without even realizing it, Subaru had started answering the man.

It wasn’t as if he suddenly believed the masked man or trusted him. But any port in a storm, as they say. In moments like this, no matter how untrustworthy someone might be, it was natural to want to cling to something.

That was probably all it was.

5

The first thing the masked man said after hearing everything was scathing.

“You have blundered terribly.”

Subaru had answered all of the man’s questions, explaining what had happened with Rem simply and carefully—while leaving out some of the more complicated bits.

He’d mentioned how Rem’s memory was messed up, and that she had knocked him out and fled. And that there was a dangerous

young girl with her.

"I know. I'm a big idiot. But that's not all you've got to say, yeah? I showed you all my dirty laundry, so you're not just gonna have a laugh and call it a day, right?"

"Fool. You think I would spend my own precious time ridiculing a clown like you? This girl, is she reasonably intelligent?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

Overwhelmed by the masked man's aura, Subaru answered honestly.

Rem showed her skills in all sorts of everyday situations as a maid, but being good at chores didn't necessarily make her intelligent.

That came from her uncanny ability to discover people's talents, positioning people in the right place at the right time and knowing when to act. In combat, she could read Subaru's actions and coordinate perfectly with him without saying a word.

Rem was clever. Even if she'd lost her memories…

"In that case, it is likely she has beguiled you."

"B-beguiled? You mean she tricked me? What do you…?"

"In this sort of situation, it is not an issue of memory. What matters is whether this girl is aware she is being chased, and whether she has the skill to analyze her pursuer. For example…"

The masked man's eyes looked Subaru up and down. Subaru's shoulders hunched a bit; he felt attacked for his lack of foresight.

And watching him, the masked man's eyes narrowed.

"For example, leaving tracks in the meadow intentionally in order to disguise the direction in which she fled."

"_____"

"After being knocked unconscious, you were undoubtedly flustered upon awaking. When under pressure to find someone right away, how would most people react to seeing obvious tracks?"

They would run off like a bloodhound chasing a scent.

That was both the implicit answer in the masked man's mocking gaze, and what had in fact actually happened. Of course, it was possible to tell him he was wrong, but…

"…True, I couldn't find any tracks as soon as I entered the jungle. But I assumed it was just the poor footing…"

"Not averting your eyes from an inconvenient truth?"

"Me being an idiot isn't some big new discovery for me. My redeeming qualities are my flexibility and resolve—is what me and

the other me concluded."

That wasn't an answer that would make sense to anyone else, but that was how Subaru answered anyway.

The masked man's theory made perfect sense. When Subaru thought about it, the tracks in the meadow had been *too* obvious. Some wild foxes and rabbits would also intentionally leave tracks and then leap into tall grass to confuse predators.

If the tracks Rem had left in the grass were the same—a cunning trap to trick Subaru—then…

"She sent me off on a wild-goose chase to buy time to escape…"

"In such cases, most people would choose to escape in the exact opposite direction. From a psychological perspective, choosing the direction that puts you farthest away from a pursuer is logical. Do you understand?"

"…It's aggravating, but I get it. Damn it, Rem!"

The masked man was right. If she had left those tracks to lure him away, then she'd most likely gone in the other direction. Assuming that was where she was headed, he still had a chance to catch up with her if he went to the other side of the meadow.

Though this is really making me feel like the bad guy…

"Whether it's my face or body odor or whatever, I'm used to leaving a bad first impression. I'm gonna catch you!"

"Quite the spirited response. Here, take this."

"Whoa?!"

Subaru stood up and was about to rush off because he couldn't stand hanging around any longer, when the masked man tossed him something he'd fished out of his bag.

Catching it on reflex, Subaru looked down to see a small knife in a leather sheath.

His eyes widened, and the masked man simply shrugged.

"This is not a place to challenge with a single whip. Use it well."

"I'm definitely grateful and all, but…you sure? I can't give you anything in return."

"It matters not. On occasion, even I feel like a spot of charity. Or would you like to try to steal all of my baggage with that knife?"

It was clearly a joke, but he had given Subaru the opportunity to do just that.

The masked man possessed a certain amount of skill, but not so much that the outcome of a fight with Subaru would be a foregone

conclusion. In that sense, this could almost have been called a gamble.

However…

"My name is Subaru Natsuki. There's no denying I owe you one for this, and I repay my debts. I won't forget this."

Fastening the knife to his waist, Subaru bowed deeply. The masked man simply snorted.

"The path has been set. You may proceed. Use every means at your disposal and win back the girl's trust."

"That's exactly what I'm gonna do. Thanks! Oh, right—almost forgot."

"What?"

Having waved his hand in gratitude, Subaru was about to run into the forest, but then stopped short. The masked man's question sounded exasperated, but then Subaru pointed at the forest in front of him.

"I'm going this way to get back to the meadow I was in before, but I wouldn't recommend you go in there. There's a scary hunter somewhere in there. They'll nail you from a distance with a bow, and I don't think any number of lives would be enough to survive. If you're planning on moving, I'd go around it if you can."

"…I see. I shall keep that in mind."

"Yeah, please do. See you later!"

With that, Subaru had avoided the situation of his benefactor getting done in by the hunter. That would have left a bad taste in his mouth.

Subaru rushed into the forest and sprinted at full speed back to the clearing he had originally been in.

"This is nice and sharp!"

Fortunately, it was not too much effort to get back there. The knife from the masked man was sharp, and it was a lot of help in clearing away the leaves and branches in his way.

A knife this size seemed like it would be quick to chip depending on how it was used, but Subaru didn't notice any issues. If anything, it felt like a quality piece of work.

"It looked like he had some pretty expensive stuff on him. I wonder who he was…?"

Still mystified about that, Subaru hurriedly made his way back to the meadow. And from there, he searched for the spot where he had woken up, and…

"…Found it. This is the real deal."

He'd found some irregular tracks leading in the opposite direction of the original set of tracks. Rem had done as much as she could to erase them, but even if she got rid of her own, she couldn't fully hide Louis's.

Given the effort it looked like it had taken to cover them, there was no way these were also a trick.

Meaning…

"I'm finally on your tail, Rem…!"

Just as he had noticed before, his words made him sound just like a villain, even as he continued to follow the tracks that would give him a chance to make a second impression. As before, the tracks continued to the entrance of the rainforest, but there was no hiding the footprints in the mud or the broken branches.

"I found it! With this…"

I can catch up with Rem.

Boldly moving forward, Subaru followed the footsteps in the mud, and—

"—Huh?"

Being fully focused on tracking her, he didn't notice until it was too late. A tied vine snapped beneath his foot. The branch it had been holding in place snapped back with incredible force, slamming into Subaru's side.

"Gehh?!"

Swiped by a branch as thick as his arm, Subaru went flying. Rolling across the muddy ground with a cough, he struggled to get back up after the impact.

The unexpected attack made his eyes and head spin like a patrol car's flashing lights from the shock and the pain.

"W-was that…"

After a short while, the pain subsided, and he finally stood up. Subaru could still feel it in his legs, and he could tell he'd been hit hard in his side.

But more importantly…

"A trap?"

Though she was escaping, Rem wasn't content to just run away.

Even without her memories, she still did everything she could, with all her might. That was what made her so fearsome.

And Subaru Natsuki finally realized something.

—This was the start of his second serious fight with Rem since coming to this world.

CHAPTER 2

A BRAVE CHOICE

1

"Guoowaah! Gaah!"

There was a moment's weightlessness. Then came the pain of hitting a hard surface.

Even though he knew he was falling and prepared himself for the landing, it was still quite the impact.

The most unexpected thing, however, was that there was another thick branch trap lying in wait for him after he landed. His shoulder blade was hit especially hard, and his eyes watered from the pain.

"Every time… But I gotta say, it's a good thing these traps have only been followed up with more environmental booby traps. All hail the knife…"

Subaru put the knife away again and caught his breath.

Turning around and looking up, he saw the trunk of the tree that he had been strung up from just moments ago. There was a long vine extending from one of its thicker branches down to the ground. He had cut it with his knife, but further down the vine was…

"A snare… I've seen them in manga before, but I didn't realize this kind of trap would work in real life," Subaru murmured to himself as he pulled off the snare made of vines that had snagged him by his right ankle.

The trap had been set on the ground, and the moment he'd stepped into it, he had been yanked up into the air. He still wasn't sure exactly how it worked.

And he didn't have the time to figure it out, either.

“So this is Rem’s knowledge and dexterity at work, even when she doesn’t have her memories… This whole chase just confirms that she’s definitely Big Sis’s little sister no matter what state she’s in.”

It was obvious, but this experience was really driving it home. Of course, this wasn’t how he’d wanted to come to this realization, so it was a bittersweet feeling.

More than an hour had passed since Subaru had followed Rem into the jungle.

Following the advice of the masked man he had met in the other clearing, he’d managed to discover the tracks that Rem had covered up and find the route she had taken with Louis. But he hadn’t caught up with them because of the traps Rem had set out of pure wariness, and the false leads she had left for her pursuer.

“The fact that Rem can make a pitfall big enough for an entire leg with a single punch is a real problem… The gap in our physical prowess is really showing.”

And mixed in among the smaller traps were some serious traps like that last one, which were designed to seriously stop him in his tracks.

How long would it have taken me to get out of that vine trap if I hadn’t stumbled upon this knife?

The thought alone was enough to make him shudder. And what made him feel most impatient was…

“Hiyah!”

He swung his whip, striking a suspicious bit of ground.

An instant later, there was a powerful crack as one, two, and then three branches whipped out. If they’d all hit him, it wouldn’t have been a surprise if he’d broken an arm or two.

The biggest traps were designed to completely rob him of any ability to act—there were not many of them, but the fact that they existed at all significantly slowed his progress.

The thick branch attack set right at the entrance to the jungle could also have been considered one of those bigger traps.

As he advanced deeper into the jungle, the big traps he discovered grew in both intensity and dangerousness. This was less because Rem was growing crueler, however, and more that she was simply improving.

“She’s studying and getting better at setting traps the longer I chase her… Damn it, you did always like stuyding. I’d prefer if you

were a little less dedicated right now."

He knew Rem was a hard worker and good at putting in effort, and he was happy that she had not lost that tendency even after losing her memories, but still, he wasn't super happy about this particular instance of it.

Long story short, in the middle of their little battle, Rem was growing. Since Subaru's growth had pretty much capped out, the already massive difference in their abilities was becoming even starker.

I need to get to her before the gap becomes insurmountable…

"There it is."

In the gap between the trees that had been used for a trap, he spotted a tiny spot of peeled bark on a tree.

It was a very small mark, like the nicks on a cat's scratching post. But those little spots of childish play were what had guided Subaru this far.

Basically, they were the signs of a hindrance.

Ironically, what was slowing Rem down and giving Subaru a trail to follow was the Archbishop she had brought along—Louis Arneb.

No matter how carefully Rem tried to cover her tracks, Louis was ruining her efforts.

"That piece of shit…"

Subaru's heart did not feel any lighter despite that lucky break.

Of course it didn't. Even if Louis's presence was benefiting Subaru, he couldn't be happy about anything related to that horrible Archbishop.

Even if Louis was not the one who'd actually stolen Rem's name and memory from her, the three Gluttony siblings were equally steeped in sin. None of them was any less guilty than the others.

It didn't matter that she didn't have a physical body or that she had lived a messed-up life. That had been Subaru's answer to Louis Arneb, who had been crying and begging in that white world.

So even if Louis was the reason he was able to stay on Rem's tail so closely, even if this led to him eventually explaining things to Rem, he had no intention of changing the way he treated Louis. Not in the slightest.

Besides…

"Why do I have to chase after Rem like this in the first place…?!"

Subaru bit his lip in anger at how unreasonable the situation was.

He had considered the possibility that Rem wouldn't possess her memories or recall her own name when she woke up. Obviously, it would have been best if she had come back exactly as she had been, but with the precedent that had been set by Crusch and Julius, he had not gotten his hopes up too much.

His hunch had been right on the money. Rem had forgotten both herself and him. Even so, Subaru thought he could hold on and still support her. With Emilia, Ram, Beatrice, and everyone in their camp helping, they would be able to support Rem. That was why he'd been able to hang on.

But now he was chasing after Rem in a jungle with no one to rely on, while she was doing everything in her power to get away from him.

"Why did it end up like this…? Why is it always…?"

Nothing ever fell neatly into place.

Rem could have woken up, remembered everything, been surprised by how much time had passed, and then they could have continued their story together. That would have been fine.

Or even if Rem had been in the same condition as she was now, he wouldn't have had to suffer like this if his reliable comrades were here. That would have been perfectly fine, too.

Fate always set Subaru Natsuki along the most difficult road.

And this wasn't just true for him. It constantly happened to everyone he cared about, too.

"That's enough complaining, Subaru Natsuki."

Gritting his teeth, Subaru slapped his cheeks with both hands.

The sharp pain startled him, and helped temporarily banish his feelings of self-pity.

It was true—fate always directed him down the most difficult path. That was why, despite feeling the lash of countless difficulties, Subaru Natsuki always stood back up and pressed forward, even as he coughed up blood.

"The man who turned the hardship he faced into a whip. That's me."

The Guiltylowe that he'd made into his whip had been less like a wall and more like the lowest hurdle in all the trials and tribulations that had blocked his path, but still.

He got himself fired up, letting his spirits swell and channeling

all that heat to his brain so he could come up with a plan. That was how he had always done things.

"Think, think, think, think. Even if I keep up the chase, Rem will realize what Louis is doing at some point, and then there won't be any more tracks. I have to finish this before that happens."

Assessing their relative strengths, he tried to weigh his advantages against his opponent's.

At present, Rem's primary assets were her dexterity and attentiveness, both of which persisted despite her memory loss. There was also her prodigious growth as she continued to build traps on the fly, and her adorable face and voice. He would've loved to be able to watch her at work, but that would have to wait.

Meanwhile, the main thing Subaru had going for him was his ability to use a whip and knife. And, as aggravating as it was, the clues Louis was leaving for him. He also decided to count his mean mug as a point in his favor. Plus, there was the fact that he knew Rem better than she knew herself right now.

"…She must have realized I'm following her."

The repeated traps made that much obvious, but he realized she must have also sensed him on her trail. Otherwise, she wouldn't have gone to the trouble of setting this many traps. The first few might have been set just out of caution, and under other circumstances, she would have prioritized fleeing.

The fact that she hadn't done that and had instead kept setting traps meant she was sure Subaru was pursuing her. And the reason she was sure of this had to be the Witch's stench.

"How much do I stink right now…?"

In the past, Rem and Beatrice had told him it faded over the course of several days, but it increased sharply right after he died and returned, or whenever he was dying frequently.

And in the past half a day, he had lived through all of the doubled-up Subaru Natsuki's experiences before being teleported into the jungle.

"I must stink more than I ever have before."

While he contemplated that, Subaru dismantled two small traps and then a third medium-sized one, continuing to trace Rem's footsteps using Louis's clues.

It was like Hansel and Gretel following breadcrumbs. Except Subaru was alone, and the two girls were the ones running away.

"Oh, this time it's in a pretty obvious place. Next is…"

Noticing a torn bit of bark, Subaru set his next course.

Louis wasn't intentionally giving him directions, so the marks didn't actually provide much in the way of guidance, and more often than not, they were very difficult to notice. Most likely, they'd been made when Louis was left alone while Rem was setting the traps.

Most of the previous signs were hard to find, so it was nice to find one that was more obvious.

"These are a huge help. If Rem had noticed and covered them up, I wouldn't be…"

Just as he was about to finish that thought, Subaru froze.

Then he went back to the tree he had just passed and looked at where the bark had been scraped away. It was a big, healthy-looking tree, and the mark had been put in a fairly noticeable place.

Would Rem really have missed that?

"Knowing Rem…"

Given how attentive and perceptive she was, she would have covered any obvious marks.

If she'd left this one behind, then either she had been distracted, or…

"…There!"

Subaru threw a big clump of plants, mud, and roots at the path he had been about to walk down.

The clod arced through the air, fell into the high grass—

—and there was a loud crash as the grass sank, swallowed up by a massive hole in the ground.

"Whoa…!"

This pit made a mockery of all the other little traps he'd seen so far. As it opened up, nearby trees creaked and also fell in. This was a mega trap. If Subaru had been caught in it, he would have been buried alive and put completely out of commission.

Every previous trap had laid the foundation for one big, decisive move. The clues he'd been relying on had been used to lure him into a formidable trap that would have buried him alive.

It was a method that suited Rem, and he wanted to compliment her on it, but…

"If I know Rem, then this isn't the end, either."

Setting a trap that would disable her pursuer would have been the ideal outcome. But Rem was far too observant and too diligent and too adorable and earnest and heartwarming, and—

“When she gets impatient, she’ll come and deal with the problem herself. Isn’t that right, Rem?!”

Spinning around, Subaru looked up at the tree that had been marked.

Just then—

“Ngh!!!”

Rem flew at Subaru from one of its branches with her teeth set in a snarl.

2

She’d been unable to shake off her pursuer, and unable to stop him with traps.

What would the Rem Subaru knew do if she found herself in that situation?

She could find her pursuer by scent, and if she noticed the breadcrumbs he was using to follow her, then she would use them to her advantage to set another trap for him and finish things head-on.

Subaru had read her like an open book. The problem was…

“…Haaaaah!”

…the difference in their combat abilities meant he couldn’t stop her.

“Guooh!”

Subaru was sent flying with a groan as Rem’s arm hit him on her way down.

Frankly, both the fact that she could move as well as she did without any assistance from her legs and the fact that Subaru had reflexively tried to catch her were both fully unexpected.

“How persistent can one man be?!”

“W-wait, Rem, listen to me…” Subaru pleaded, blood dripping from his nose.

“No!”

Crawling across the jungle floor, she glared at Subaru with her blue eyes.

“If you had just given up on us there, I had no intention of doing anything else to you. And still, you chased us… Just stop it!”

“It really hurts my feelings when you put it that way…”

“The stench is unbearable! It’s impossible to miss your approach. And it’s even worse than it was in the clearing…”

Keeping pressure on his nose, Subaru staggered to his feet.

He was standing, whereas Rem was crawling on the ground. At a glance, it might have looked like the situation was in his favor, but if she started crawling across the ground like in a horror movie and knocked him into the big hole with her raw strength, that would be it for him.

Carefully gauging the distance between them, Subaru had no option but to try to resolve the misunderstanding.

"Rem, please listen to me. Apparently I have a pretty strong smell to you—"

"Yes, you stink."

"Hearing you say that is so nostalgic…! Anyway, I apparently give off a strong smell, and I know it feels evil to you, but I don't have any bad intentions!"

Raising both hands, he tried to demonstrate his lack of animosity.

Sadly, that wasn't enough to convince Rem. The Witch's scent kept her guard up.

No matter where I go, the Witch brings nothing but trouble.

"There's the stench, and I know your first impression of me wasn't good, either. I've lived with that for eighteen years now. So would you please let me have a do-over?"

"…A do-over?"

"It was my fault. I was wrong. You're uneasy and don't remember anything, and I didn't explain anything. I got so caught up in my own head, I didn't consider your feelings at all…"

His impatience and anxiety had made him completely ignore how she felt in all this. But there was no point in trying to explain himself. He didn't need words in order to protect himself. He needed words to reach Rem and soften her heart.

"You're important to me. I want to protect you. So please listen to me. Please don't reject me. Please just give me one more chance."

"…Is that it?"

"…Huh?"

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

Subaru was dumbfounded by her response.

The emotion in her voice was not what he had been hoping for. But it also differed from his worst expectations. Her voice was quiet, tinted with barely controlled anger.

“R-Rem…?”

“Of course I think you are suspicious and strange, chasing us all around, giving off that wicked stench. But…” Rem glared at Subaru, who was watching her in bewilderment, as if he were the manifestation of evil. “More than anything, that cannot absolve you of attempting to abandon such a little girl. How could anyone trust such a terrible and contemptible person?”

“Ah.”

Subaru didn’t know what to say in response to her condemnation.

As the words sank into his brain, he realized the reason he had failed to earn Rem’s trust had nothing to do with the Witch’s scent. His own choices had been to blame all along.

Even if Louis was the pure manifestation of evil, to Rem, she was nothing more than a young and weak little girl. He had completely missed that.

“_____”

He didn’t know how he should respond.

Subaru had overcome countless difficulties. Sometimes, he failed to overcome them and died, forcing him to approach the problem from another angle. But right now, he didn’t have a solution for this.

Should he apologize? Make an excuse? Tell the truth? Which should he prioritize? No matter what he picked, he couldn’t see it changing Rem’s distrustful gaze.

And all this was the result of a decision he had made that was already locked in, thanks to Return by Death.

“Nothing more to say, I see.”

While Subaru simply stood in place with eyes darting around and face rigid, unable to speak, Rem reached her limit.

She raised her upper body and started to move away from Subaru. It seemed she had no intention of killing him to spare herself any future anxiety.

She probably thought Subaru wouldn’t keep following them after having been cornered here. Of course, he knew that couldn’t be any less accurate. Even if she rejected him, Subaru would continue to hold out his hand until she was willing to take it. But…

“…Re—”

As she prepared to leave, he started to call to her.

He called her name, even without having a clue as to what he

should say next.

When…

“_____”

As he stretched his hand out toward her back, he noticed something.

A shadow peeking through the dense foliage—a familiar figure.

“Rem!!!”

Before a thought could cross his mind, he immediately leaped toward her. Surprised, Rem froze.

The moment he had her small body cradled in his arms, an arrow from that powerful bow passed overhead, and splinters exploded from the tree it slammed into.

3

The big tree cracked and split from the terrible impact.

It was so powerful he could feel it from a distance. He also felt Rem’s warm, soft body in his arms.

Then he quickly confirmed his limbs were all still attached. That was good enough for now.

“Wh-what are you—?”

“Don’t talk, you’ll bite your tongue!”

Rem was slow to react, but he didn’t have time to listen to her complaints.

He stumbled forward, reaching out and seizing her in his arms, then rolled backward while holding her tightly.

He could feel Rem stifling a scream, but it was drowned out by something louder—the thunderous crash of the broken tree falling to the ground.

They rolled, rolled, and rolled some more, until the ground suddenly disappeared.

“Gah!” “Kyah?!”

After a moment of weightlessness, they both hit the ground.

It was the big hole filled with collapsed trees and dirt—the pitfall Rem had set for Subaru. Subaru had rolled into it on purpose to block the enemy’s line of sight.

His plan had succeeded. But it had come at a price.

“Gah, gh… Yeah, that’s broken…!”

He had unconsciously pulled Rem close with his left arm, and she had broken the fingers that held on to her. The middle finger,

ring finger, and pinky of his left hand were all badly broken.

Subaru groaned, doing his best not to look too closely at the fingers, which were pointing in the wrong direction, as Rem crawled away from him.

"Of course! You came at me so suddenly… What in the world is happening?!"

"I didn't get a chance to mention it, but there's a dangerous hunter hiding in the trees. The odds they're out hunting deer and just shot at us by accident are pretty much zero at this point… Ghhhhh."

Cold sweat breaking out on his brow, Subaru made a splint of wood and a handkerchief for his broken fingers.

The only silver lining was that the broken fingers were on his left hand. If they had been on his dominant hand, Subaru would have been about as helpful as a kindergartner going forward.

"A dangerous hunter… Not your ally?"

"You think an ally would provide supporting fire like that? And how would that even be… Whoa?!"

The moment he poked his head out of the hole to check out the situation, the felled tree right in front of him exploded. It seemed the hunter was intent on getting a clean shot at them. It was probably quite obvious they had no means of retaliating from a distance.

"You know, ordinarily a sniper would change position after their location has been revealed. That's what you're supposed to do… That ass is definitely looking down on us. Not that I can do anything about it."

"…That was an arrow? Unbelievable. That's ridiculous!"

"Yeah! Exactly! It'll leave a big gaping hole in your chest if it hits you!"

He had already died once, pinned to a tree like an insect in a science experiment.

But there was something odd about this. The last time Subaru had ventured into the jungle, he'd gone in the opposite direction.

"What are you doing over here, you asshole…?"

The pain from his fingers was hammering away inside his head. He gritted his teeth until it felt like they might crack and desperately tried to think.

It seemed highly unlikely this hunter was someone other than the culprit who'd murdered him before.

Both attacks had come from the same powerful bow. The question was, why were they proactively targeting him?

Maybe this is private property, and they're a little too aggressive about driving out trespassers. The hunter is insanely accurate—but maybe they just suck at holding back?

"Maybe we can talk this through! Hey! I don't want to fight! It was just by chance that we ended up in this jungle…"

"Wait a moment! Are you including me and that girl when you say that? I refuse to be put in the same group as you!"

"Is this really the time— Whoa?!"

The answer to Subaru's request for a ceasefire was an arrow that left a giant gouge in the ground.

The powerful impact also silenced his argument with Rem. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before the hunter had cleared all the obstructions between those arrows and the three of them as they hid in the hole.

"It would appear this is not someone who's willing to talk… "

"If they're using arrows, we have to watch out for arcing shots, too… If this hunter was a real sniper, they could wait hours… But with a bow and arrow, it's not like staring through the lens of a scope and sitting still, so they probably can't wait forever."

In manga or movies, there were lots of scenes of snipers waiting for their targets for long periods of time, but a bow and arrow wasn't the same as a gun that could be fired at a moment's notice.

"They're trying to end this quickly."

Expecting the enemy to try something in the not-too-distant future, Subaru decided he did not have the time to think for long. If they weren't willing to talk, then there was no avoiding a fight. And he didn't have many cards to play in a fight.

"The only choice is running away, like Teach taught me."

Fortunately, because they had slipped into the hole, the hunter couldn't see their exact positions. If they climbed out the other side and kept low to the ground, they might be able to sneak away into the undergrowth.

Or…

Subaru looked at Rem, who seemed to be waiting with bated breath.

"…? Why did you suddenly stop talking? Did you come up with a plan to flee?" Rem asked.

"…It is an emergency, after all, so I guess you are at least

willing to listen to me.” Subaru said.

Seated neatly there on the ground, Rem pouted in annoyance. But if she was not attacking him, then she must have understood this was not the time to argue. If she was willing to call a truce, then that made things easier.

“Rem, listen. I’ll jump out and get their attention. You climb out the other side of the hole and get to safety.”

“Huh…?”

Between fleeing together or making sure Rem got away first, it was obvious which had better odds.

No matter how masterful an archer the enemy was, this was a dense jungle, and Subaru could move while watching out for incoming arrows. He should be able to buy some time.

“After you’ve gotten away, I’ll make a run for it, too. But I don’t want to get too far from you after this, so I’d appreciate it if you could leave me some sort of markers. It might not make a ton of sense, but in my homeland, arrows are a sort of sign you can use to indicate direction—”

“Don’t tell me that.”

Subaru quickly told Rem his plan, but she interrupted him with a sharp glare.

He was confused, not understanding why, which just made her more annoyed.

“Deciding everything by yourself… And to top it off, you are telling me to run away? Me? The person who is furious at you already for attempting to abandon a child?”

She rejected Subaru’s plan for the exact same reason she had rejected Subaru at first.

I get the logic. You could say it’s an answer that a good person would give. But I didn’t think she would force me to do it now of all times.

“That’s… But I…”

“I’ve had enough of your excuses. There is no time. But I refuse to run away alone. I will not leave that child behind.”

Subaru couldn’t contain his surprise as Rem turned her attention to what was outside the hole. She looked past the big tree that had been blown apart earlier—to another one a short distance beyond it.

“I wondered where she was. So you hid her there? How is she staying quiet while all this is going on…?”

“…It was difficult carrying her around, so I knocked her unconscious. She shouldn’t wake up for a while.”

“You…”

Louis was going to be a drag on their escape, even now. That realization put Subaru on the verge of exploding, but Rem’s incredibly typical response made his frustration crumble.

That sort of over-the-top but decisive action was just like her.

“…I don’t think it was a good choice, either.”

“No, it was a spectacular play. Just to check, you aren’t willing to just leave her while the two of us escape together?”

“I do not know who I am, but I would bite my tongue and kill myself before doing such a thing.”

Honestly, abandoning Louis and running away with Rem was the best choice as far as Subaru was concerned, but it didn’t seem like Rem would allow that.

“Damn it, me. You just had to suddenly decide to be a merciful Buddha when the shadow swallowed us…”

When the shadow had reached the green room, his decision to pick up Louis in addition to Rem had led to all of this. There was no going back and changing it now, but he could still shout from the rooftops that he had made the wrong choice.

“What are you going to do?”

“…I’ll do it. I’ll bring her, too. That tree, right?”

“…Yes. In the hollow of the tree. Is there any chance of winning?”

“My Teach taught me to run without hesitation when a powerful enemy shows up.”

Clind had told him that it didn’t come down to a difference in strength or anything like that.

In this world, most opponents were going to be stronger than Subaru, so the safest assumption was that any opponent he ran into was at least one tier above him.

That was why running was his top priority. If he couldn’t escape, then…

“Gotta use anything you can. Rem, I know you don’t like it, but lend me a hand.”

“…If it’s for the sake of helping her.”

She looked right at his outstretched hand and refused to take it.

But she was willing to go along with his plan, even if she wasn’t happy about it.

He swung his left arm forcefully once, checking the condition of his broken fingers.

There was…a fair amount of pain. A throbbing sensation clawed at the back of his skull, but he steeled his nerves so they wouldn't distract him while he was running.

And then…

"Hiiyah!"

He pushed a smaller tree trunk out of the hole. The part that emerged was instantly pierced by a terrifyingly fast arrow. The impact ripped it out of Subaru's arms and sent it flying.

"Uoooooh!!!"

Ignoring that, Subaru climbed out of the hole and stepped onto the rough ground.

No matter how good the hunter was with a bow, there was still a limit on how fast they could shoot. Unlike a gun, a bow needed to be nocked and aimed again. That opening was his only path to survi

—

"—It's coming!"

Subaru heard those words right as he took his first step after having climbed out of the hole. Only two seconds had passed since the first arrow had blown away the decoy—but that was enough time for the skilled hunter to loose their next arrow.

"Ngh!"

Right after he'd heard Rem's voice, the ground behind him erupted.

He had managed not to freeze up or drop into a defensive crouch when he'd heard her voice. Perhaps it would have been more apt to say that he was lucky his reaction time wasn't fast enough to respond to Rem's warning, but that was still good enough.

As he ran straight for the tree, another arrow came at Subaru two seconds later. If this continued, it wouldn't be long before Subaru looked like a porcupine.

However…

"I don't think so…!"

The hunter's next attack was interrupted by a clod of dirt and a valiant shout.

Sitting with her back against the side of the hole, with a muddy

stone in hand, Rem had hurled a missile—or more like a cannonball.

"It'd be better if she remembered how to use magic…!"

When Subaru had been going over what tools they had to fight with, Rem had mentioned that it would be difficult for her to use magic or her oni horn's strength. More precisely, she couldn't remember exactly how to use them. And there was no time now to help her remember. What Subaru suggested instead was taking advantage of her raw physical strength—throwing stones in order to attack the hunter that had underestimated them and not changed positions earlier.

"A cornered rat can still bite back! Hope you enjoy the feeling!!!"

Evading the shock wave from the arrow's impact, Subaru shouted these words as he watched Rem's big rock fly in the direction where the arrow had come from.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Not ever knowing how to hold back was one of the things that made Rem so charming.

The rocks he had gathered just in case they might be useful now transformed into deadly projectiles in her dainty hands.

"And while Rem is buying me time…"

Now that the sniper had been momentarily silenced by artillery fire, Subaru reached the tree. Circling around it, he peered inside a hollowed-out cavity and saw Louis sleeping in a blanket of her own blond hair.

"Please do not stop moving!!!"

"Ngh!"

Noticing his moment of hesitation, Rem shouted and put an end to Subaru's indecisiveness.

Somehow managing to tamp down on the fierce reluctance he felt, Subaru picked up Louis and jumped from the tree.

"Huh?"

Just as he leaped out and was about to start heading back to Rem, however, a black shadow suddenly appeared, blocking his path.

The plan had been to go back to the hole in the ground the same way he'd come. *There wasn't anything here before.* Then, looking up at the shadow, he was struck speechless.

"_____!!!"

The enormous shadow that had slipped silently through the rainforest and appeared right in his path was a giant snake, maybe thirty feet long. The creature had yellow eyes and green scales. Then Subaru noticed a twisted, white horn on its forehead, and realized what it was.

"A demon beast…!"

Subaru regretted overlooking such an obvious danger.

He should have known. He was currently emitting the scent of the Witch more strongly than he had at any other point since he'd arrived in this world. That meant demon beasts would surely be drawn to him, just like in the Auguria dunes and so many other places before.

This dark, deserted jungle was the perfect place for them.

"_____"

Opening its big mouth, the snake took aim at Subaru.

It was big enough to swallow him whole, and Louis with him. Seeing it up close and personal, he felt time slow down.

Hmm, that's not good.

It almost felt like it was happening to someone else.

As he cursed himself for reflexively trying to protect Louis, the snake's mouth—

"_____?!"

"Uwah?!"

Subaru had instinctively closed his eyes, so when something wet dripped on him from above, he panicked.

At first, he'd assumed the snake was the type of monster that sprayed its prey with digestive fluids before eating them, but that wasn't it. What had drenched him was pitch-black blood spilling from the mouth of a snake that had been pierced through the torso with a sharp arrow.

5

"Ngh!"

Subaru gasped in surprise, seeing the black blood pouring out of the snake's mouth.

But his shock had nothing to do with the big snake or the blood covering his body.

"Why did the hunter…?!"

The attack had saved Subaru and Louis, who were about to be

swallowed whole by the snake.

The snake's torso, which looked like it was big enough to hold three Subarus, had been skewered by an arrow shot by the hunter who had caused him so much trouble until just moments ago.

"They saved me…?!"

He didn't understand, but that was the only answer he could come up with.

He didn't think this could be neatly explained by something like the typical manga plot device, where the hunter would suddenly declare, "I'll be the one who kills you." But regardless of the reason, Subaru had been saved. And this did not end with just stopping the fangs that had been about reach him in that moment.

"_____!!!"

The snake let out an earsplitting shriek. Instead of chasing after Subaru, it slithered in the direction from where the arrow had come, furiously turning on the archer who had taken aim at it.

The thirty-foot-long snake slithered across the ground, bearing down on its new prey.

It did not seem so slow-witted as its massive body would have suggested. When it slithered across the ground, it was almost like the ground itself was moving.

As the snake approached, the hunter prepared another arrow but missed.

"_____!!!"

The snake bared its fangs and attacked.

The hunter leaped back, evading the monster while loosing another arrow at close range to finish off the demon beast.

A gruesome struggle to the death was unfolding among the trees. The sounds of a furious struggle rang out as Subaru raced back to the hole where Rem was waiting, with Louis in his arms. And…

"Rem, give me a hand! We need to run now!"

"—! Is the child safe?"

"Yeah, she's annoyingly fast asleep! C'mon, let's go!"

Subaru reached out to Rem, who was still leaning against the back of the hole. But she looked at his hand, then shook her head, putting her hand on the edge of the hole.

She was stubbornly intent on not taking his hand. In which case, Subaru withdrew his outstretched hand, then took out his whip and tied Louis to his back.

If he tossed her aside, it would surely lead to another standoff with Rem, and he wanted to avoid that.

"Also…!"

"Wai—!"

After making sure Louis was tied tight and wouldn't fall, he reached down and lifted Rem into his arms. Her expression immediately grew tense, but…

"Your only choices are me, the hunter, or the snake!"

"…The snake, if it can be talked to."

"It can't, so just put up with me as second-best! Let's go!"

While Rem couldn't hide her conflicted feelings about what seemed to him to be an obvious decision, Subaru quickly turned and ran from where the hunter and snake were having a fierce battle.

Whichever one won, they would most likely come after Subaru. He did not know how long it would take for the two to settle things, but he wanted to get as far away from them as possible.

"Hah, hah…"

And as he ran while holding Rem, he couldn't help being struck by a nostalgic feeling. He had run around a forest being chased by demon beasts like this once before.

But he had been carrying Ram in his arms that time, not Rem.

"Big Sis doesn't remember that, either…*hah*… I'm the only one who still remembers that one…"

"You are breathing heavily. We'll be caught at this rate."

"I know! Both of you sisters…*hah*…no mercy at all…!"

Even though he was carrying a different person, the commentary was just as scathing.

Subaru pushed himself even as he grew breathless, running through the forest desperately while leaving Rem to watch their back.

I've been running all over today.

His body and mind were battered and worn out. He would have loved to just throw everything aside and take a nap if he could.

If we shake off our pursuer, I definitely will. Eight straight hours, even.

"I just gotta hold out until then…!"

"…Ah, wait!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow?! What?!"

As he shouted encouragement to himself, Rem pulled his ear

roughly. Grimacing in pain, Subaru saw Rem point in another direction.

"I hear the sound of flowing water…a river? That would cover our tracks, no?"

"That would definitely help! If we can cross the river, it would make it harder to follow us…!"

Unfortunately, between his hoarse breathing and the pulse hammering in his chest, Subaru couldn't hear the sound of water, but he had no reason to doubt Rem's hearing.

"That way," Rem said, pointing.

Following her guidance, Subaru changed direction and rushed forward in search of a river. And as he broke through a cluster of trees and out into a clearing…

"It *is* a river! But…"

As they made it out of the trees and the clearing spread out before him, Subaru could finally hear the tremendous crash of water, too—because it was a massive, rumbling river. Flowing about ten yards below them, over the side of a cliff.

As if making a mockery of their idea to cover their tracks by crossing it.

"This is too much…"

Rem gulped, seeing the big river below them.

Considering the raging torrent of water and how high up they were, her reaction was natural. And she seemed to be blaming herself for having led them here.

But there was no time for regret, or blame, or apologies.

"Damn it—did they finish fighting?!"

An awesome roar thundered deep in the jungle behind them.

It sounded like the snake's cry was filled with some sort of emotion. Whether it had experienced victory or defeat, the survivor of that battle was probably coming for them now.

"Before that, we need to—"

"—Leave me here."

Subaru was about to say it was time for them to hightail it out of there when Rem interrupted him.

Subaru gasped at the tension in her voice.

"What?"

"Please leave me here. It is my fault that we took an unnecessary diversion. There is no time to delay. I will stop the enemy somehow, so—"

“D-don’t be stupid! I’m not leaving yo—”

“Then what will you do?! Continue carrying two girls who can’t move on their own when you are already out of breath and your knees are quivering? What more can you do?!”

Rem went red in the face as she argued with him. He didn’t let her intensity overwhelm him, but he didn’t have an immediate answer to what she’d said, either.

Subaru was not smart enough to instantly think of a backup plan on the spot. But at the same time, he quickly came to a decision that didn’t require any intelligence.

“No. I’m not going to leave you.”

“Ngh! You stubborn—”

“Who’s the one being stubborn here?! I know you feel responsible! But that has nothing to do with this! You think I could ever leave you behind?!”

“Wha—?”

“There’s no point if you’re gone! If you’re going to die, it would be better for me to die instead. What do I have to do to get you to understand that?!”

Subaru tried to get her to take back her suggestion with his complete and honest feelings.

He meant every word of what he’d said. Of course he didn’t want to die. Even if Return by Death gave him more opportunities, he didn’t want to die. It was simply a matter of picking the least bad option.

But even so…

“I’ll choose a way where neither of us has to die.”

“…What about the girl on your back?”

“If I could use her as bait, I’d do it, but it would be a problem if you complained about it. So for now, I’ll bring her with us, too.”

It was aggravating how Louis was constantly getting mixed up with their other problems, but if he tossed Louis aside now, it would be impossible to patch up his relations with Rem. That was not an option, so as much as he hated Louis, he wouldn’t abandon her here.

“_____”

Rem’s eyes widened, and she fell silent.

He could almost see her confusion as she tried to decide what to do about the person shrouded in a repulsive odor. As he kept an eye on her, Subaru looked around them, searching for a way out.

Sadly, there wasn't a path to survival conveniently lying there, waiting to be found. The situation was dire enough that Rem had suggested using herself as a decoy.

In which case…

"Guess we have to jump."

"Wha…? W-wait a moment! That is beyond reckless! In this situation?!"

"You can't move your legs, and I've got a millstone tied to my back, and three broken fingers, and an iffy rib or two…"

"Your fingers are… No, look! It's absurd! From this height… If we jump, we'll just pass out and drown!"

As she pointed down at the river, Rem listed very practical objections.

It was a thirty-foot drop, and they had two girls who couldn't move as well as an injured guy who somehow had to keep track of them. Any attempt to reach the other side by going through those rapids was essentially a death wish.

"It isn't suicidal. And worst-case scenario, at least we'll die together."

Subaru flashed a toothy smile, only for Rem to slap him.

"Absolutely not!"

"Argh!"

His neck twisted from the impact, and he groaned in pain as his cheek turned red.

"Fine, I get it. Then I'll make sure we won't die."

"_____"

"I'll make your wish come true. Because I'm your hero."

Her eyes opened wide.

Not because these words had brought back a memory, but because she was surprised to hear him still repeating that same suspicious line he'd said right after she'd woken up.

But that was fine.

He was not saying it for Rem's sake right now. He was casting a magic spell on the pathetic boy reflected in her blue eyes.

Sensing danger approaching, Subaru exhaled.

"Hold on tight."

Rem was still trying to resist, but Subaru stepped toward the edge before she could say anything else to try to stop him. Anticipating their fall, Rem clutched tightly on to his clothes, and—

"I won't forgive you if we die!"

Well, I suppose I can't die, then.

Subaru smiled to himself and kicked off the edge of the cliff.

6

There was a crash and a spout of water. Then a powerful current spun his body around.

He'd just managed to land feetfirst in the water, minimizing the impact on them, but it was still a hard landing, and with Subaru's HP already flashing red, it was hard to shake the feeling that he was just barely hanging on through sheer determination.

And as luck would have it, he didn't need to shake that feeling himself.

"Gahgh."

His whole body was being thoroughly rinsed and scoured by water, like a towel in a washing machine.

I need to get to the surface and breathe. But I can't move.

Even if he tried to kick his way up, he had something important in his arms, so he couldn't make it.

"_____"

The powerful current kept crashing into him, but he could still feel the object of his affection in his arms and the object of his hatred on his back. Neither the whip he had tied around himself nor his arms were going to let go.

"Gagh."

Water entered his nose and mouth, and it felt like it was getting in his eyes and ears, too.

He moved his arms and legs in vain, struggling as he was carried down the throat of the massive creature that was the river. But if they reached the point where all this water emptied out of the river, there would be no hope of survival.

He had to do something before that happened.

"Gah, gurgh."

He kicked at the water as random thoughts bounced around his head.

Is Emilia safe? What about Beatrice? Ram and Meili? Julius, Anastasia, and Echidna are probably managing okay. Everyone will be safe if Patlash is around. It would have been a huge help if Patlash was here. If Patlash was here, she would have saved us. Saving and being saved. And the person I most wanted to save broke my fingers. It's a bit

late, but that really hurt, and I did a good job not crying when it happened. I don't want to look lame in front of Rem. Ram or Beatrice, either, or Petra or Garfiel. Otto, Clind, and Frederica already know I'm pathetic, though, so they're fine. It would be scary if Roswaal found out, so I have to make sure to hide it from him. I need to get back to Pristella to help those people, and the royal selection, and tomorrow, everyone—

"Gagh, gahh."

Everyone was…

7

"Geugh."

Subaru managed to latch on to a branch and pull himself in. He grabbed it with his left hand. His three broken fingers cried out in protest, but he ignored them.

"Ugh, bgh."

All the water he had inhaled came back up as he heaved. And as he did that, he held the weight in his right arm close and pulled her face out of the water. While looking at her unconscious face, he desperately pulled himself up the river's bank with the help of the branch.

"Geh, ugh."

Somehow managing to get up the side of the bank, he gave in to the nausea and vomited up more water. Still struggling against the feeling of water sloshing around inside him, he laid the girl down on the ground.

"_____"

He checked to see if she was breathing by putting his ear near her mouth. There was no response. Biting his lip, he pushed on her chest and started doing CPR. But she still wasn't breathing. He leaned down to see if he needed to do rescue breathing, but just as his face got close to hers, she coughed up water. Tilting her head to the side, he helped her eject the water.

As a fresh wave of exhaustion washed over his body, he undid the whip that lashed the millstone to his back and set her down. Maybe it was thanks to her being unconscious to begin with, but she was still breathing weakly with no apparent problems.

Meaning everyone was safe…

"Safe…"

A sudden wave of dizziness hit him, and he collapsed on the

spot.

He felt like they needed to get away from the riverbank and at least hide in the brush line, but his body wouldn't listen. His stamina was completely spent.

Without managing to move another finger, he started slipping into darkness. As he passed out, he hoped that someone else, not the hunter or the snake, would…

"R…em…"

He prayed that she, at least, would be saved.

8

_____.

_____.

_____.

"…Ah."

Slowly, his consciousness was drawn back up from the cold, dark depths.

Quietly, he remembered to breathe, and air filled his empty body. More, more. He sought oxygen as if he was drowning. He opened his mouth wide, and…

"Pipe down, asshole."

"Mgh."

Something was shoved into his mouth quite brusquely.

He opened his eyes to see what had happened but couldn't see anything. Apparently, something was wrapped around his face and was covering his eyes. But he could tell someone had shoved something into his mouth.

The taste of dirt and grass, something big and solid… Subaru quickly realized it was a shoe.

Someone had shoved the toe of their shoe into his mouth.

"Ugh! Blgh! Wh-what are…? Agh!"

"What do you think you're doing? Do you not get the situation you're in?"

"Geh, pwah."

Right after he'd spit it out, the shoe landed right in his stomach. The man bent down as Subaru gasped and sputtered, and then he spit on Subaru.

As all of this happened, Subaru's head was still spinning.

He couldn't see, he did not know what was going on, and all of a sudden, he was being beaten up.

And to top it all off, when he tried to rub his aching chest, he found his arms were tied behind his back. His legs seemed to be tied as well, so standing or running away was out of the question.

"Wh-what…?"

"Ah? How long are you gonna keep—"

"C'mon now, calm down! He doesn't know anything. Let's at least undo the blindfold."

"Tch."

Subaru writhed, drool dripping from his mouth, while the two men argued over something. The second one pacified the violent one a bit, who then grumbled and seemed to move away in annoyance.

And then came a reasonable-sounding man's voice.

"Sheesh, sorry about all that. I'm sure you can't really tell what's going on, but I'm going to take off the blindfold for now. Sorry, but I can't untie your hands or feet."

"_____"

Though Subaru did not answer, the man slowly reached for his head and undid the tightly tied blindfold. There was a little bit of pain, then a sense of release. Subaru took a deep breath, enduring the pain in his chest, and waited quietly for his vision to return.

"—What is this place…?"

When he could see again, he saw a bunch of tents and campfires. And then he saw men busily moving all around, equipped with swords and armor.

The best description that came to his mind in that moment was —

"…This looks just like a *Taiga* drama."

It had nothing to do with the biome he was in. No—it was like a scene straight from a lavishly produced period piece. A camp busy preparing for a battle that was just about to begin.

It was almost like a historical recreation.

No, that's not it.

"We found you when we went to fetch some water. Sorry, but you're our prisoner now."

The person who moved in front of him was presumably the man who'd undone his blindfold.

He put his hands on his hips and looked at Subaru with a good-

natured sort of troubled expression.

Subaru Natsuki had become a prisoner.

CHAPTER 3

IT'S ROUGH BEING A MAN

1

Prisoner.

Subaru gulped in massive confusion at that word.

"_____"

Subaru was a captive in a camp that seemed like a set built for a historical drama. There were dozens of tents set up, and a mixed army of humans and demi-humans were going about their business wearing armor, carrying weapons, and generally looking dangerous.

Subaru was sitting on the hard ground, in a place with a simple tent serving as a windbreak. His hands were tied behind his back, and his feet were bound, too.

However, what was more important to him than his lack of freedom was…

"Rem… There should have been a girl with me. What happened to her?" Subaru asked quietly.

"Oh—the first thing you're worried about after finding out you're a prisoner is a girl? I guess it would be safe to assume those girls are pretty important to you?"

The guy squatting in front of Subaru, who had bright-orange hair, raised an eyebrow. This was the same man who had stopped the violent guy from sticking his shoe in Subaru's mouth.

He looked a little older than Subaru, and had an amiable sort of smile, but judging from his light armor and the sword at his waist, he was one of the warriors in the camp.

Not a knight, but a warrior.

After spending over a year in this world, Subaru could tell that much.

Knights were showy, while warriors were unrefined. Not in a bad sort of way. Just different.

A knight was expected to be skilled, but they also had to be composed and inspire the public. On that point, integrity and appearance were all important. Reinhard and Julius were good examples.

Meanwhile, a warrior only needed the strength to fight and win. The guy in front of him was no exception in that respect.

"…I'll ask again. What about the girl who was with me?"

"You're pretty stubborn… They're both safe. A little too spirited, even."

"Ngh, really?! Then tell me sooner, damn it! As long as the blue-haired girl is safe, that's good enough."

"That's a pretty cruel thing to say!"

The guy scratched his cheek and flashed a wry smile as Subaru suddenly leaned forward.

Subaru had simply reacted honestly, but even if he explained the situation in detail, it wouldn't make sense to the man. Either way, hearing Rem was safe was a relief. Now he had to get a handle on their situation.

"Being captured is a bit hard to swallow, but putting that aside for the moment… What about Re…the girls?"

"If you want to see them, I'll let you. As long as you answer my questions honestly. To be clear, the two of them are locked up at the moment."

"Locked up?! Why would you…guah!"

His immediate assumption was that Rem was in a terrible situation. But as he started to complain, a man with an eye patch stomped on his hands, which were tied behind his back, grinding against the broken fingers specifically.

Subaru gritted his teeth and groaned in pain.

"Shitstain," the man with the eye patch grumbled. "Looks like you don't understand what it means to be a prisoner. You should only talk when we ask a question!"

"Jamal, stop it! He's gonna pass out again!"

The man stepping on Subaru's hand had a wicked grin on his face.

"Let him learn a little. It's fine as long as I don't mess up his head, right? Hell, might as well just break the rest of—"

"Jamal."

The younger man said his name again in a quiet voice. Jamal's breath caught in his throat, and he reluctantly withdrew his foot.

"Fine, fine."

"Gah, gh…"

"Tch. Be grateful to Todd. You piss me off."

Jamal spat at Subaru and left, seemingly annoyed with everything. Subaru could finally breathe again now that his broken fingers were not being stepped on.

"Phew. Sorry about that. He's short-tempered and on edge. It was his unit that found you at the edge of the water, but…"

"But…?"

"Apparently the girl who was with you put up quite the fight. Half of his squad got wrecked, and that doesn't exactly reflect well on him as their leader."

After Todd had delivered that explanation, Subaru understood Jamal's anger a little better.

That must have happened after Subaru had climbed out of the river. Rem had woken up first and had then beaten the stuffing out of Jamal and his crew.

It made sense why Jamal would want to take out his anger on Subaru, who was that girl's companion.

"Still, I hate that guy…"

"Ha-ha, what a coincidence. I don't particularly like him, either."

Todd shrugged with an easy smile. It was an answer that held no malice. It was not exactly what Subaru wanted to hear after his broken fingers had been stomped on, but enduring it for the moment, he exhaled.

And, clearing his head of the pain, he looked up at Todd, who seemed like someone who could be reasoned with.

"So you're Todd, right?"

"Oh, good ears. That's right, I'm Todd. And as for my questions…"

"Just answer honestly, right…? What do you want to know?"

I'm just an unimportant guy from another world. Just plain old Subaru Natsuki. I don't know how to cross between worlds, and I'm not a specialist in any field like the protagonists in these kinds of stories usually are. Just lacking in every single way, and the more I delve into it, the more I want to cry.

"What can someone in my position even answer for you?"

“Where does that withering self-pity even come from? Anyway, I don’t really have my hopes up, but we’ll start with one thing I’d like to ask. Are you one of the Shudrak people?”

Todd asked the question kind of showily, but it was not a word Subaru had heard before.

“…‘Shudrak’…?”

“See, knew it.” Todd put his hand to his forehead. “I can already tell. You have no connection with them at all.”

“Okay, wait a sec. I haven’t even answered yet. Isn’t that a little quick—”

“Nope. There isn’t anyone who would lie about their clan if someone asked. And no one would fail to recognize the name of their own clan, either. No one would believe you if you tried to claim you were Shudrak after that.”

Todd said this with finality, and it didn’t sound like a bluff, either. His conviction was persuasive, and Subaru couldn’t really argue.

But in that case…

“So who are the Shudrak, then?”

“The people we’re looking for. They’re somewhere in that giant place…the Badheim Jungle.”

“Badheim Jungle.”

“This area we’re in is all jungle. It would take years to search the place.”

There was a tinge of annoyance in Todd’s voice, and following his gaze, Subaru could understand why.

It was a giant, enormous jungle, big enough to make anyone want to cry.

Looking at the camp where he was being held, the sea of green continued all the way to the horizon on both the left and right, and if a similar view extended behind him as well, then, just as he had thought over and over while traipsing through it earlier, this place really might be comparable to the Amazon.

Given its size, its harsh conditions, and the demon beasts and other unknown species populating it, the jungle was a veritable den of demons.

“…Searching for people here? To put it mildly, isn’t that impossible?”

“You think so, too? Yeah, this ain’t great. If I take years to get back, my fiancée is gonna leave me.”

The tragedy of a soldier sent away to the battlefield and separated from his lover. Sensing something along those lines in Todd's voice, Subaru couldn't help but sympathize.

But Subaru was also currently very far from people important to him, so his sympathy wouldn't last forever.

"Hey, Todd. I think I've answered your questions honestly. So I'd appreciate it if you kept your word."

"A guy's telling you how he can't see his fiancée, and you're asking him to hook you up with your woman? Talk about a heart of stone."

"I don't want to hear that from a guy whose buddy just stomped on my broken fingers."

"Ha-ha, yeah, you got me there."

Subaru's response was brazen, but instead of getting angry, Todd just laughed. And then he loosened the rope around Subaru's ankles, giving him enough freedom to walk.

"You can manage small steps. I'll take you to the cells."

"Yeah, looks like it. Lead the way."

"Bold. You a noble or something?"

Todd chuckled wryly and slapped Subaru on the back.

As he stepped out of the prisoner tent with mincing steps, Subaru could feel the men around him watching curiously.

It really does look like an army camp.

A hastily erected wooden fence surrounded the camp and some basic stables where he could see several slender land dragons tied up. There were tents of different colors all lined up, and it looked like more than a hundred people were milling about the camp.

It was a sizable group…but even so, there weren't nearly enough of them to search the entire jungle. He could understand why Todd would groan at the thought of a never-ending job.

And just as Subaru was sympathizing with Todd and the fiancée he couldn't meet…

"Ah, that reminds me… We found a knife in your stuff. Where'd you get that?"

Subaru's eyebrows furrowed for a moment at the question, and then he realized what the man was referring to.

The knife he had gotten from the masked man in the jungle. The one that had done so much for him in helping him get through the jungle and break out of Rem's traps. It was a bit late to think of it now, but maybe *he* was part of the Shudrak.

Would talking about the guy be betraying him?

"What is it?"

Subaru's silence was making Todd dubious, which forced Subaru to make a difficult choice.

This man had treated Subaru fairly, albeit while still keeping him as a prisoner. It was hard to call theirs an amicable relationship.

Meanwhile, it was likely he would never meet the masked man again, but he had given Subaru useful advice in searching for Rem, and also given him that knife. A fairly high-level benefactor, in the balance of things.

Meaning…

"…It's my family's knife. A family heirloom."

"Really? Damn, you must be something, then."

"Eh?"

After thinking it through, Subaru decided to cover for his benefactor and lie.

But his response made Todd's voice rise ever so slightly. Subaru couldn't understand why, but Todd continued.

"I mean, it's a knife with the swordwolf crest on it. From what I've heard, those are presented by the emperor directly to his retainers. That must mean you're from some famous family."

"…Wait a second."

Hearing Todd's voice change, Subaru gulped.

The history of the knife he had been given was surprising enough in its own right, but he had to set that aside for the moment.

The problem was the other words he'd said. The *swordwolf crest* and *emperor*.

"_____"

Pursing his lips, Subaru stopped and looked around again.

There were tents and campfires and men laughing at him, and a massive jungle—and beside a particularly large tent, flapping in the wind, was a blue flag.

—And in the middle of the blue flag was an image of a wolf's head run through with swords.

"No way…"

Subaru had been in this world for more than a year now.

He had been introduced as Emilia's knight on several occasions, and he couldn't be an outsider forever, so he had been studying all

sorts of things that were considered common knowledge in this world.

And thanks to that education, he recognized the emblem on the flag—the swordwolf crest.

"The Holy Volakian Empire."

The crest of the empire on Lugunica's southern border.

For the first time, Subaru realized they had been sent flying across the border all the way into another country.

2

The Holy Volakian Empire.

That was the name of the country where Subaru was currently being held prisoner.

The impression Subaru had from his studies of this world mostly amounted to *Empires tend to be sources of evil, like in games, right?*

Volakia was one of the four major powers in this world, like Lugunica, and it controlled the most territory, dominating the south end of the map.

Unlike Gusteko to the north or Kararagi to the west, Volakia was blessed with fertile lands and temperate climates, and seemed to have naturally developed a culture that followed the law of the jungle.

Dozens of races, tribes, and peoples lived within its borders, where the strong did whatever they wanted and the weak endured what they must.

A place where violence of that sort was tolerated—in other words, a land that Subaru Natsuki was uniquely unsuited for.

"The Holy Volakian Empire."

Seeing the martial banner fluttering next to the tent, the words slipped from his lips.

Hearing Subaru's dumbfounded murmur, Todd cocked an eyebrow slightly.

"Hail Volakia!"

"Whoa?!"

Subaru jumped in surprise at the sudden shout that went up behind him, and Todd laughed.

"What's with that reaction? You're the one who started it."

"Hail Volakia?"

"Hail Volakia."

That confusing response was enough for him to figure things out.

Whenever someone invoked the name of the Holy Volakian Empire, the standard response was to say "Hail Volakia." That was

a custom cultivated in the empire's citizens.

The other thing Subaru had figured out was…

"…Now I can't let it slip that I'm from Lugunica."

This was actually a bad situation for Subaru.

He was the knight of a candidate participating in the royal selection currently taking place in Lugunica. Under Roswaal's guardianship, Subaru had received an official knighthood, granting him a noninheritable, lowest-tier title of peerage.

And even without that title, there was no one in Lugunica who didn't know about the royal selection. Because of that, if they had still been in Lugunica, he could have gotten some accommodations by revealing his identity. At the very least, after making sure Rem was safe, he had considered bringing it up with Todd, who seemed like a man who could be reasoned with.

But if this was Volakia, that was a different story.

"_____"

Even Subaru could tell from reading the history books of this world that Lugunica and Volakia did not get along great. Four hundred years ago, they had fought repeated, major wars that spanned both of their territories, but there hadn't been a major war since Lugunica had sworn its covenant with the Holy Dragon. But there had been plenty of smaller border conflicts, and there was no question that both countries were currently in a cold war. He had heard that before the royal selection was announced, they had reached an agreement that the empire wouldn't use the opportunity to start a war.

But what if he started talking about being a minor noble of Lugunica here in the heart of Volakia? If he were dealing with a sensible Volakian noble, that might have been one thing, but this was a military camp out in the field. Even if he gave Todd the benefit of the doubt, could he really expect a VIP reception from hot-blooded guys like Jamal?

"Not a chance."

Meaning he had to be careful with his identity.

Looks like there's a silver lining to Rem forgetting everything. The tiniest, micron-thick silver lining.

"Hey, what happened? Your legs bad, too?"

"Nah, it's not that. Just the reverence welling up in my heart after hearing 'Hail Volakia'…"

"I see. Can't help that. I wasn't considerate enough."

Subaru put on the best fake smile he could manage, hoping that cheap excuse would convince Todd.

I only really know about it from books, but looks like this is the empire.

It was safe to assume that his potential trump card of revealing his identity and getting back to the Mathers estate was off the table.

If I run into a sensible sort of person, then maybe they'll respect my standing, but…

"The odds are a bit low for a gamble."

"What are you muttering about? C'mon, this is the meeting you wanted so bad."

"Ah."

A slap on Subaru's shoulder pushed him forward as he continued taking small steps.

Looking up, he found he had been brought to metal cages set up on the edge of the camp. And among the cages sat a girl—

"Rem!"

"Ngh! You're…"

Seeing the girl he had been looking for, Subaru reached out to the cage. Having noticed him, she furrowed her eyebrows and stared at him with the same hostility as before.

That's fine. As long as she's okay…

"Thank goodness! They didn't do anything to you, did they? Are you hur—? Gh!"

Because he was hurrying while taking small steps, his feet got tangled up and he toppled forward. He couldn't use his arms to catch himself, either, so he slammed headfirst into the metal cage and slumped down with a groan.

Seeing such a shocking display, even Rem's wariness lost out to her surprise.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"Sorry… I didn't mean to scare you."

"I am not scared! Don't belittle me… Are your nose and teeth all right?"

"Eh?! You're worried about me?" Subaru sniffled while wriggling himself up like a worm.

"Huh? Of course not."

Rem's response was cold.

But when he looked into her blue eyes, Subaru let out a little joyful sigh. Rem's expression stiffened even more.

“Anyway, if you’re all right, that’s what matters. Nothing strange happened, right? Can you move your legs now? You must’ve gotten soaked, but you didn’t catch a cold or anything, did you? Just tell me if there’s anything.”

“Please stop clinging to me and acting so devoted. I cooperated with you in the jungle because I had no choice, but that has not changed anything about your—”

“Actually, since you were asleep for so long, your immune system might not be one hundred percent yet. Hey, Todd! It would be really bad if Rem caught a cold. Could you give her a blanket?”

“Don’t just ignore me and move the conversation along!”

He was trying to improve Rem’s situation, but she was furiously fighting him on it.

Looks like she isn’t any less suspicious of me after all we went through getting away from the hunter and that demon beast.

Subaru was scratching his cheek with almost amused exasperation when Todd clapped his hands.

“All right, I get that it’s an emotional reunion, but you two don’t seem to be on the same page. Now then, is it safe to say you’re Ms. Rem?”

“…I wonder.”

“Well, that’s a problem. There’s gotta be a limit to your stubbornness.”

Todd grimaced at Subaru and Rem’s awful communication.

Rem turned away in a huff, but apparently her cold reception was not reserved for just Subaru. It was apparently dispensed freely for everyone in this camp—Todd included.

Every dog is a lion at home was an apt description for Rem’s personality.

“If you snap at everyone, people will think you’re a mad dog.”

“There’s no need for that. Calling me a dog? Not only do you have an awful odor, but you are also rude.”

“What, you think someone with body odor has to have bad manners? Like cleanliness is next to godliness or something?”

There was a saying that went something like *hate the priest, hate the vestments*, and that was pretty much exactly how Rem was reacting to Subaru.

The bad first impression I made is really not going away.

Knowing it would be difficult to get Rem to back down, Subaru turned to Todd.

“Anyway, she’s Rem. Thank you for helping her…though when I see her in a cage like that, it’s hard to be too grateful.”

“I told you, didn’t I? Jamal and his unit got walloped. He has a reputation to uphold. He won’t hurt her, though.”

“…Can I trust that?”

“I wouldn’t lie to a noble. Even Jamal won’t grumble too much.”

Todd reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the knife. Subaru’s eyes opened wide as Todd used the knife to cut the rope tying Subaru’s hands and legs together.

“Ohhh… Are you letting us go?”

“Just take her and go…is what I would like to say, but I can’t, sadly.”

“_____”

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s not malicious. As you can see, we’ve set up camp here to fight the Shudrak in the jungle. But we’re not the only ones out here. If you go wandering around, you’ll get caught by guys from another camp.”

That meant there were other encampments also here to search the jungle. It was a warning that if they ended up wandering into the territory of another camp, there was a danger they would be captured and interrogated again.

“Meaning the chance to eat my fill of boots in a camp full of Jamals.”

“I don’t like pain much myself, so I try to resolve things with words where I can. I’m not really one to talk, but I’m a bit of an outlier when it comes to imperial soldiers.”

“In other words, most of your comrades are as overbearing as that rude man.” Rem’s voice was dripping with loathing.

“Pretty much. And I guess that’s what made you angry, so they brought it on themselves.”

Subaru did not exactly have any love lost between him and Jamal, but Rem’s first encounter with Jamal must have been awful. That Todd did not try to protest meant that, even though they were allies, he couldn’t really defend Jamal’s actions.

“I get that you’re worried about us, Todd. But what should we do, then? You were bemoaning your fate and all earlier, too, but we can’t exactly just wait for you guys to finish clearing out this jungle.”

“Of course not, and we’d never hear the end of it for letting an

outsider kick around our base forever. You don't have to worry; a supply unit is going to the nearby town in a few days. You can leave the camp with them."

"I see—a supply unit."

It was obvious, but a massive amount of food and water was needed to support a large number of active people. And there was no way of providing that solely with what they could procure locally, so supply units were just as important to an army as combat troops were.

There was a logistics unit attached to this camp, and Todd was recommending that Rem and Subaru accompany them.

"Then it's all right for us to crash with you…I guess?"

"Why not? The fighting shouldn't start that quickly… But you should probably stay away from Jamal. Unless you feel like chowing down on another boot."

"I'll take that to heart… You all right with that plan, Rem?"

Rem was still looking away coldly, not responding.

But if she wasn't actively arguing with him about it, that meant she did not have an argument or a better suggestion. *I'll just think of it as an adorable rebelliousness. No—a super cute and adorable rebelliousness.*

"You two sure have an odd relationship. What's between you two?"

"Just think of us as travelers. Rem is precious to me, and I don't know the other girl—"

"After all this, you still…"

As she listened to his words, Rem's disbelief seemed to grow.

Subaru knew that he had messed up, but he just couldn't bring himself to acknowledge that Louis was with them.

Honestly, if they're willing to take her off my hands, I'd love for them to do that.

"Oh yeah—she's not in the cage with Rem. Where'd she go?"

"…That girl was taken for healing," Rem said, looking away from him. "When you recklessly jumped into the river, her face was cut somewhere along the way."

"Healing… Healing?"

Subaru was confused for a moment, and then his expression became serious.

"Did you say 'healing'?!"

"Wh-what? That's right. Healing. Or are you saying you'd try to

stop her from being healed because you hate her?"

"I mean, you aren't wrong there, but that's not the problem. Hey, Todd! Where's Louis getting healed? Which tent?!"

Todd looked surprised by the sudden change in Subaru's attitude. The man clearly didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation. Subaru gripped his shoulders and asked again.

"Where?"

"If she's getting healing, then she'll be at the tent over there with the red banner. But what's the big deal?"

"Everyone's life is in danger!"

Pushing Todd back, Subaru hurried over to the tent with the red banner.

Rem and Todd looked at each other, confused by Subaru's sudden change in demeanor.

"What was that? Anyway, I'm gonna follow him, but…"

"Please go. If you don't stop him, he might do something absurd."

"Why do I have to be the one being told that, though…?"

Todd scratched his head and chased after Subaru, who had suddenly raced off.

And while watching Subaru's back disappear in the distance…

"…What is with him? Everything he does perplexes me."

Rem murmured softly, unheard by anyone.

Meanwhile, Subaru's eyes were scanning the camp, looking for the red tent.

The moment he'd heard that Louis was being healed, the worst possible outcome had crossed his mind.

For whatever reason, Louis was currently not herself, but if she was healed and regained her senses, there was a chance she would return to being the Archbishop of Gluttony.

If that happened, Subaru and the amnesiac Rem wouldn't be able to fight her. There would be terrible losses even if Todd and Jamal and the rest of the camp fought together.

Subaru's heart was uneasy.

I can't let that happen. It has to be stopped.

And facing the red tent that caught his eye, he charged inside.

"Sorry! Is there a scary, blond kid—"

"Aauuuaaah!!!"

Just as he started to push past the tent flap, a blond bullet shot

forward. It landed on his upper lip, right under his nose. He recoiled with a grunt and fell backward. He reflexively stopped his fall with his left hand.

The same hand that sported three broken fingers.

"Ghgyaaaaaaa!!!"

"Aaa! Aaa! Uuaaah!"

Subaru almost passed out from the pain. And as he writhed in agony, there was an imp standing over him and dancing almost joyously: Louis.

This was just like when she had woken him up in the meadow. She wore an innocent, abominable smile and kept clinging to his chest.

He wanted to knock her away, but the almost blinding pain stopped him.

"Gh, kh, aaah, aaah…"

"Oof, you land on your left hand? That's rough…but the girl looks pretty normal from here. Looks like she got the cut on her forehead checked out, too."

Catching up to Subaru, Todd lifted Louis up off his chest, where she had been playing. She swung her arms and legs, but Todd paid this no mind.

There was a bandage on her head. She had been given treatment, but it was just simple first aid, not magic.

"Kh, gah… R-right. That's what you meant by treatment for her head…"

Subaru had been mainly concerned about magical treatment, which could potentially heal things he didn't want healed. But apparently he had been worried for nothing.

"Treating this affectionate kid like you don't know her, and having the girl you like be so cold… I can't say I understand, but looks like you've got it rough."

"…I won't deny it. There aren't a lot of people who have had it as rough as me."

If there was a limit to how much suffering someone could experience in a lifetime, then Subaru was just racking up lifetimes' worth of suffering at this point. On the other hand, if the count reset with each death, then maybe he would never know peace.

The thought alone is terrifying, but…

"For now, just live. That's the important part."

"That feels like a low bar… So what are you going to do? Am I

safe to assume you'll wait for the supply caravan and go with them in a few days?"

"Hmm? Ah, right. Yes, please. Sorry for having to count on you for everything."

"Hmm? You don't have to worry about that. I don't plan to let you freeload."

Subaru looked up in confusion. Todd set Louis down and put his hand on his hip, then gestured to the imperial camp behind him.

"Look at this camp. There's never enough hands. We've got lots of jobs to do, so you'll have plenty of work."

"…What, so he who does not work shall not eat?" Subaru muttered.

Hearing that, Todd started rolling the proverb around in his mouth.

"Yeah, exactly. That's a nice turn of phrase."

Todd nodded, and beside him Louis started nodding, too, copying him.

Looking up at both of them, Subaru cracked his neck loudly.

"…It's better than being told not to do anything or having to eat more boots, I guess."

3

"Ugggggggggh…!"

"C'mon, bite on a stick if you need to. This is gonna sting," Todd said, wrapping a bandage soaked in a pungent medicine around the splint on Subaru's broken fingers before tying it off tightly.

"The last thing is to drink this medicine. It should help with the pain some, at least."

Subaru was covered in a cold sweat as Todd gave him a bottle of medicine. Inside was a viscous, green liquid, and steeling himself, Subaru downed the bottle.

"Bleh! Nasty! I-I can feel it clinging to my throat…!"

"It's famous for being hard to drink. It's rare and works like a charm, though. It'll help you heal faster."

Todd smiled as he picked up the empty bottle.

Subaru wiped his mouth, then…

"Sorry," he said as he bowed slightly to Todd. "You wasted valuable medicine on someone like me."

“It’s fine. Honestly, if you’d left it any longer, those fingers would have started rotting off. Can’t exactly call in a favor from a swordwolf knife bearer like that.” Todd laughed magnanimously.

Subaru bit his lip. The reason Todd was being so friendly was that he thought Subaru was connected to high Volakian nobility. He felt bad deceiving someone who was treating him well, and his heart twinged.

“Still, though, at times like this, it makes you think. I could get it fixed in no time with healing magic.”

To mask his guilt, Subaru changed the subject.

He was acting like it was no big deal, but it was something he had been wondering about—the treatments that seemed available here had been pretty lacking in fantasy vibes.

“Oh? Now that’s extravagant. Healing magic isn’t something you run into every day.”

“…I guess that’s just how it is?”

“Well, yeah. Of course, it would be useful if you could heal wounds or sickness as easily as lighting a fire or making a breeze,” Todd said with a shrug. “It’d heal your hand in no time, too.”

Subaru looked down. He felt both uneasy and relieved that his supposition had been on the mark.

In the past, back before he had found out about Roswaal’s plot and thought the man was just some easygoing jester noble, Roswaal had told Subaru about the rarity of healing magic. How magic was influenced by talent, and that people who could use healing magic were incredibly precious.

Add to that the fact that this camp’s medical tent was filled with poultices and bottles of medicine and stocked with medical instruments of all kinds instead of magic items.

And the fact that Todd had not relied on anything magical while taking care of Subaru’s hand—just medicine and a splint.

There was no mistaking it…

“Healing magic really is rare.”

“At the very least, I’ve never seen it before. From what I’ve heard, everyone who can use it is kept holed up in the capital. Either way, for regular folks, it might as well be in a different world entirely.”

“_____”

“If anything, I’m surprised to hear you even mention it. It wouldn’t even have occurred to me as being an option.”

It was something so unfamiliar, it was like it didn't even exist.

That was how little the people in the empire, or at least Todd, interacted with healing magic.

And so, having expected that response, Subaru just shook his head.

"No—I mentioned we were travelers, right? We've been around, and we happened to run into someone who could use healing magic before, is all."

"I see. I thought your clothing was odd. Your outfits didn't seem suitable for the heat around here."

Todd looked Subaru up and down. The clothes Subaru was wearing were the ones he had worn to get through the desert and take on the Pleiades Watchtower. Despite the desert vibes, the Auguria dunes had not been that hot, but in order to deal with the sandstorms, pretty much every bit of his skin was covered. Because of that, here in hot, humid Volakia, he was wearing an outfit that could only be described as out of season.

"So you ran into a healer during your journeys and were corrupted by the convenience."

"Phrasing! It is definitely convenient, though."

Subaru had actually been helped out by healing magic a few times…or maybe a lot of times.

From the very start of his time in this world, surviving his very first major hurdle had required Beatrice's healing magic. If it had not been for her, Subaru's stomach would have stayed split, and he would have had to live with his insides hanging out.

"I don't want to have to trip over my own guts again."

While Subaru was remembering a fairly unique experience, Todd exhaled quietly.

"Healing magic, huh?"

"—? Todd?"

Subaru furrowed his brow at the sudden change in mood.

"Nah." Todd closed an eye. "I was just thinking healing magic's a brutal thing, and I'm glad I don't see it much."

"Brutal? …Why? Isn't it the opposite?"

Subaru struggled to understand what Todd was trying to say.

"I mean," Todd said, one eye still closed, "healing wounds means not dying. No pulling back because you're wounded, either. Get your wounds healed, and get back in the fight. That's what it means to be able to heal wounds."

“_____”

“It’s a scary thing. How much did whoever thought of the first healing magic love fighting? Can’t say I wanna see it up close, either.”

Subaru couldn’t formulate a reply.

He wouldn’t say it was an even-handed perspective. It was not like healing magic could only be used on the battlefield. It had a role day-to-day, saving people who got sick or had accidents.

But Todd’s perspective wasn’t wrong, either.

Healing someone who was wounded on the battlefield, then sending them back in to keep fighting. There was no denying that possibility, and no denying Todd’s fear of it, either.

But if Todd’s reaction was the same as the average person’s in Volakia, then Subaru would have to keep another thing in mind on his road back to Lugunica.

That was…

“…I gotta keep it a secret that Rem can use healing magic.”

Subaru might just have been overthinking it, but it needed to be taken seriously.

Right now, Rem had forgotten how to use her magic, and in all likelihood she had also forgotten how to transform into an oni and manifest her horn. But there was no fundamental reason to assume she couldn’t do what she had been able to do before.

If, for some reason, she was able to activate her healing magic, and someone here saw…

“At the very least, it will make the road back home a lot longer.”

Whether it was for good or ill, they would definitely be stopped. And Subaru needed to avoid that. Of course, if lives were on the line then perhaps, but…

“Sorry, I got off track there. Wasn’t trying to give you any more wrinkles.” Seeing Subaru fall silent, Todd tried to reset the mood.

Subaru nodded at a perspective he had not really considered before and said, “It’s fine.”

Then, changing the topic, Todd looked out of the tent.

“But that means that missy out there is your partner on this trip, right? So why is she snapping at you so much?”

“…An unforeseen accident is probably how I’d put it. We got along well before, but for now it’s all one-way communication, in more ways than one. Gotta take the long view on it, I guess,”

Subaru said wistfully.

"I mean, it's no skin off my nose, but it looks pretty rough on you… But in that case—"

Not probing into their relationship any further, Todd touched his chin while looking away.

His gaze moved toward Subaru's right arm, which Subaru had been rather intentionally ignoring. Clinging to it, like she had been for a while now—

"Aaah?"

—was Louis, vacantly looking up at him while making a silly noise.

She was beaming as if enjoying herself as she clung to his arm, sometimes playing with his fingers and wrapping her hair around them, and just sort of having the time of her life.

"Given the ages here, she's not your kid. What's your relationship to her?"

"I already said, she's no one I know. But she's nothing good, that's for sure."

"That's pretty harsh… The girl in the cage sure seemed to care about her, though?"

"That's the problem…"

With Todd pointing it out to him again, Subaru couldn't help sighing at the complicated situation he had gotten himself into.

Currently, Subaru was striking out with Rem, and a big part of why she was so cold with him was because he ignored Louis.

But even knowing that, he couldn't bring himself to accept Louis.

Of course he couldn't. She was an Archbishop of the Witch Cult. Pure evil, with whom he couldn't coexist.

"How did things end up like this? What are you planning, and what is it you want?"

"Uuh? Aah, aaooh."

Louis just smiled at his question and did not answer.

Everything about her was annoying. Of course, if she'd answered with the same viciousness as she had shown in the corridors of memory, that would have been a problem, too, but at least he wouldn't have had any trouble writing her off as an enemy.

It was better than her acting like a baby or a little child like she was doing now, where only he could recognize how dangerous she was.

“Well, you’re on the road together. Wherever you go, you should at least try to get along a bit better.”

“…Who exactly is that FYI for?”

“Huh? Well, you can interpret it however you want.”

Cocking his head at the unfamiliar acronym, Todd stood up.

This was a medical tent, so hanging around chatting any longer than they already had would probably be frowned on. Subaru stood up as well, Louis still clinging to his right hand.

“Now then, we got your hand looked at… Ready to take care of a chore?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah, it’s better than feeling guilty and sitting around doing nothing. Give me whatever job you want. I’ll take any job other than eating boots.”

“Guess Jamal’s boot really didn’t sit well with you… Fine, fine, I won’t let that happen. For now…”

Todd glanced at a group of tents with black banners, thinking to himself.

Subaru followed his gaze.

“That is…?”

“Gear for the camp. A bunch of general stuff we needed to bring, but it’s difficult dealing with it all piece by piece. So that’s where you come in, my tidy friend.”

“…Did I ever say anything about being tidy?”

“Nope. But I was just thinking it would sure be nice if you were. And even if you didn’t happen to be, I had a feeling you’d do your best anyway, since you’re grateful for being saved and all.”

“…Gee, thanks, Todd. Anyone ever tell you that you have a shining personality?”

Todd was saying something pretty nasty with an amiable smile on his face. Subaru’s cheeks twitched a bit, and he looked over at the bunch of black tents.

At a glance, there were around twenty of them; they were all filled with supplies; and as Todd had said, they were very much not in order.

“This isn’t a one- or even two-day job…”

“Don’t worry about that; just get it done before the resupply wagon leaves. Ha-ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha…”

In other words, “hop to it.”

Considering the state of his left hand, it was a difficult request,

but that was just how things went.

"This is for today's bread, in order to get back to Emilia-tan together with Rem…"

"Uuuh!"

While Subaru clenched his fist and prepared to face the difficult job before him, Louis cheered. Lowering his arm, Subaru grimaced.

The Archbishop was adding to Subaru's mental, emotional, and physical burdens without even seeming to realize it. She was just as vicious as she was before, but even harder to deal with now.

"After Shaula, too. Too many people I don't know have been clinging to me lately…"

"Aah, uuiuh."

Dragging Louis, who seemed cheerful regardless of whether she understood what was going on or not, Subaru headed toward the black tents.

Thinking to himself that—unlike with Shaula, with whom he'd eventually come to an understanding—coexistence with Louis was impossible.

4

"…I kept cleaning up until it was dark, but…"

Coming back after his hard labor, Subaru was greeted by Rem, who was sitting on the ground with her legs extended out to the side.

She had the same grim expression and stiff voice, but it looked like she had left the fierce animosity on the shelf for now. This made Subaru's expression soften, but seeing that, she glared at him.

"I did not greet you."

"Don't read my mind… But they let you out of the cell, right?"

"…At the very least, it seems the people here are not hostile to me."

The way she averted her eyes was presumably due to the guilt she felt about the bad encounter—or rather, sudden encounter battle—she'd had with Jamal and his squad at the riverside.

Generally speaking, Rem was prickly with people she did not trust. She had become pretty gentle after coming to trust Subaru, but having forgotten all that, her mistrustful tendencies were starting to show again. And it looked like she was beginning to reflect on that.

“Being able to reflect on your choices is great, Rem. You get a gold star.”

“…Who are you to speak to me like that? Being complimented by you is not even slightly endearing. Also…”

Rem answered Subaru’s smile with a verbal backhand, then looked up.

Following her gaze, he saw the coned ceiling of the tent. Subaru cocked his head, and Rem scoffed in annoyance.

“Why do the three of us have to share the same tent? I am aware we are in no position to be asking for too many favors, but a little consideration would have been…”

“No, I think this is already plenty considerate of them. I told Todd we were partners on a trip, so… Owwwwwwww!”

“What right did you have?!”

Just as Subaru sat down next to Rem, one of her hands grabbed the area around his hip bone fiercely. Subaru writhed as his lower back creaked, and Rem’s gaze sharpened.

But then a small shadow broke in between them, stopping Rem.

“You again…”

“Uuh!”

Louis pushed against Rem’s hand, fighting with all her strength.

And Rem, who was for some reason sweet to Louis, sighed in resignation and broke off scolding Subaru. Instead, she pulled Louis toward her knees.

Laying Louis on the legs she struggled to move, she gently patted her.

“Tch.”

“…Why are you scoffing now? I cannot understand how you can be so cruel to her when she is so attached to you.”

Rem’s reaction was not exactly great, given that Subaru had such a bad attitude.

Subaru had no choice but to watch Louis carefully as she lay on Rem’s lap, trying to be ready if she ever showed her true nature.

At Todd’s instruction, Subaru had started cleaning up the black tents.

As he had figured at the start, it was not a job that would be finished in a short time. Part of it was that his left hand was not exactly in top condition, but Volakians were way less tidy than Subaru had expected, and also…

“She got in the way of my work the whole time. There I was,

trying to clean up, but she kept undoing my work and making a mess of things. Thanks to her, I didn't make any progress."

"She doesn't understand anything, so it can't be helped."

"It's the same for you, too. But you don't do that. Quod erat demonstrandum! I rest my case!"

"You are speaking meaningless babble again!"

She's the reason you're being so testy with me, so why do I have to not be testy with her?

Subaru, Rem, and Louis would only be in camp for a few days, but Todd had given them this tent to share. He had said that some of their comrades had gone into the jungle and not come back while they'd originally been setting up camp, so this tent did not have an owner, and they were free to use it.

"It's not funny, though."

Still, receiving a spare tent to use was a huge help.

He was less worried about himself, but leaving Rem in a camp filled with gruff men was concerning. Todd had said they would be treated like guests, but it was hard to know how far that hospitality would go. And Rem already had an enemy in Jamal.

If possible, he would have preferred having her around so he could watch her even while he was working, but…

"When she hates me this much, anything I say would be pointless…"

"What are you grumbling about? I have yet to even accept this tent situation…"

"Hey, Rem, about your memory…"

"_____"

As Subaru touched upon that subject, Rem's face tensed up. Still letting Louis rest on her lap, she looked up at Subaru with rage in her eyes.

It was a powerful anger, the likes of which he had not seen since they'd ended up in this camp.

"…I get why you're uneasy. But you are Rem. At least accept that much."

"…I do not know if even that much is true," Rem said, the anger still clear in her eyes.

"If you can't even accept that much, there's not much more I can say…" Subaru answered, with one eye closed.

It would have been easy to say she was just being stubborn and blockheaded. But Subaru couldn't do that. And not just because he

cared so much about her.

Subaru could genuinely understand her feelings.

She was extremely wary. Wary of Subaru filling her emptiness with falsehoods.

“It’s natural when you have nothing. I can understand the feeling.”

“You cannot understand at all how it feels to forget everything and be totally empty.”

“No, actually, I was amnesiac just yesterday, so—”

“Huh? If you are going to lie, please pick something more believable.”

It was actually true, but of course Rem wouldn’t believe him. Of course, that was baked in. But Subaru wanted to get a measure. A measure of just how far apart they were.

Whether she would be willing to accept him telling her everything he knew.

And judging by their distance…

“I’ll wait for your heart to be ready.”

“…Oh.”

At his answer, Rem’s eyes widened. Subaru smiled at her surprise.

“I would love to hurry things along, and I definitely feel impatient. But there would be no point if I ignored your feelings or hurt you in doing it. So…”

“…You will wait? Until I have a change of heart?”

“No, no. What I’m waiting for is for your heart to be ready, not for it to change. Of course, I’m going to do my best so that you might be willing to see me in a new light, too.”

Rem had her hands full dealing with herself. It was arrogant to want her to compromise with him, too.

What she needed was to do her best for her own sake, and to bridge the gap between their hearts, Subaru himself had to build up a trust with her that did not pale in comparison to the Witch’s stench.

“_____”

Hearing the resolution in his voice, Rem’s lips trembled quietly, and then she deftly slid away, turning her back on him.

I guess I upset her…

Subaru was just reflecting on his poor choice of words, when—

“—Have some.”

“Eh?”

While he was looking down, Rem turned back around to face him and pushed something out at him. Subaru was shocked for a moment, and then his eyes focused, and he saw it was a skewer of grilled meat.

“Umm…what’s this?”

“Food. Or so I was told. It was given out to everyone in the camp, and I received some… Even if it is gradual, I must work on walking.”

Rem rubbed her legs with her free hand.

Like Subaru had thought earlier, Rem had her hands full dealing with her lost memory and the legs that wouldn’t move—*So then what is this consideration for?*

I thought I had managed to break all communication between us with that last exchange.

“…Will you take it already? My arm is tired.”

“R-right away! Understood!” Subaru reflexively straightened up. “…So, um, you already ate, then?”

“Huh? Why would I eat when this child hasn’t eaten yet? Of course I wouldn’t do something so selfish.”

Rem answered him coldly and glanced at the plate set at the edge of the tent. She took the cloth off it, took a skewer of meat, and brought it to Louis’s mouth. Letting Rem take care of her, Louis nibbled at the meat like a baby bird picking at seeds.

“…She’s like a baby.”

Rem watched her with a pleasant smile.

Looking at them, Subaru also hesitantly began to eat. The meat had only been skewered and grilled, nothing more, and he couldn’t tell what sort of meat it was.

Struggling with the rubbery texture, Subaru worked to digest his surprise at Rem’s behavior.

“Hard and bland… About on par with Emilia-tan or Beako’s cooking…”

Whenever it was their turn to cook, Emilia and Beatrice tended to go hard but strike out most of the time. And they had demonstrated both that same enthusiasm and that same level of unpolished skill during the trip through Auguria.

“What are you muttering…? Ah.”

“—?”

Glancing at Subaru, who was losing himself in memories, Rem’s

eyes suddenly widened.

She was looking at Subaru. Which would presumably mean the reason she was surprised had something to do with his face.

"What is it? Please don't say something sad, like this is your first time actually looking at my face."

"It is not…that…but, umm…tears."

"Tears?"

"…You're crying. Did you not notice?"

Subaru's breath caught in his throat as Rem slowly, carefully said those words. When he touched his cheek, his hand came away hot and wet, and he was surprised.

It was not some sudden lie from Rem—it was true.

"Huh? I'm crying?"

"Y-you are. Why? Umm, do your fingers hurt, or…?"

Wiping away the tears that dripped down his face, Subaru was confused by the wave of emotion that had overwhelmed him. But his tears were not because of his broken fingers.

It's something else. Probably, it's because of being able to spend a simple moment like this with Rem.

"_____"

It was not like things had completely settled down or anything. They were separated from Emilia and the others, did not have any way to communicate with them, were trapped in a land where it would be dangerous to reveal their identities, and he was in the unpleasant situation of having no connection with Rem. And to top it all off, the ultimate evil in this world, an Archbishop of the Witch Cult, was accompanying them—and the leader of this little band was the stupid, incompetent, reckless, and weak Subaru Natsuki.

There was absolutely no reason to be optimistic. Not a single one. And yet…

"…Being able to talk to you like this…eating together…it makes me happy."

"_____"

"S-sorry. It probably doesn't mean anything to you. Just another weird thing I'm saying. It's natural it would feel disgusting to you… But it's just how I really feel."

Giving up on holding back his tears, Subaru just let them fall, sniffling as he looked at Rem.

"I've wanted to be able to spend a simple moment like this with you for so long."

Putting the skewer down on his lap, Subaru managed to wrest out that much of an explanation.

His sniffling filled the tent as he wiped his tears with his sleeve.

For a little while, that awkward sound was all that filled the air…

"…I do not understand what you are saying."

Rem's voice was soft, like a faint breath.

Still wiping his tears, Subaru thought that was a natural answer from her. Even emotional instability had limits. How was she supposed to react to tears or smiles from someone she knew nothing about?

He had just judged that their hearts were too far apart not more than a few minutes earlier, and he'd already messed things up.

Maybe I should just talk to Todd and see about getting a second tent for tonight…

"But I wouldn't laugh at your tears. I do find them unsettling… Unpleasant, even."

At that unexpected response, Subaru raised his face.

Rem was rubbing Louis's head as the girl lay on her lap right in front of him. She was not looking at him but was choosing her words carefully.

"…That is all. Please eat quickly. I am tired."

"Ah, sure."

Rem looked away as she said those words quickly, and Subaru was slow to understand. But remembering the skewer on his lap, he quickly started eating again.

"R-right. Yeah, tasty. Nice and salty."

"That is because of your tears… Because of your stench, the food simply can't be very tasty. It's not fair."

"That's…umm… Well, I'll try to think of a way to improve it."

Rem's response was cold and sour, but she had not told him to leave, nor had she complained that she did not want to eat with him. So it was up to him to think of some sort of plan.

In order to protect a relaxing moment like this, Subaru could face any trial or tribulation.

"You're kind, Rem."

"Please don't say things that'll confuse me. What is with you?"

Her response was as cold as ever, and Subaru couldn't help a wry grimace.

"…But if you want to talk about being unfair, then I have

something to say, too."

"Something to say? What? If it is about your fingers, then…"

"…It's her. The one resting on your lap."

Subaru's lip curled as he pointed at Louis, who was enjoying the best seat in the house. At that, Rem's eyes narrowed, as if she were saying *Not this again.*

"Don't get ahead of yourself. You are always talking about my… I don't really like calling it a 'stench,' so I'll say odor. But she has a similar sort of smell. You're going to ignore that?"

He was talking about the Witch's lingering scent, which grew stronger the more he died and reset. But that was connected to the Witch—and if it was related to the Witch Factor, then of course Louis the Archbishop should have had the same sort of stench.

Remembering Rem's extreme reaction to the Witch Cultists, that should have been inevitable…

"…? What are you talking about? Please do not put yourself in the same category as her."

"…Huh?"

"She does not have the same smell as you whatsoever. Please do not say such strange things in desperation."

However, Rem's response was entirely unexpected.

He stared back at her reflexively, but he didn't see anything unusual in her gaze. She was not lying or trying to dupe him, either, from the looks of it.

Meaning she really doesn't sense any miasma or lingering Witch's scent from Louis.

"She can camouflage the miasma? But how?"

In Subaru's experience, there were not that many people who could sense the miasma that was the Witch's lingering scent. There was Rem, who had the biggest reaction to it, and then Beatrice and Ryuzu—just a handful of people, really, who had ever reacted to it.

And it was hard to imagine the cultists even thinking to hide something like that. They rampaged through the world like they owned the place. And yet…

"Are you done? If you are finished, I would like to put her to sleep."

"Ah, umm… What you said before, is that true?"

"Enough."

Rem completely shut him down. But her attitude just felt like proof that she was telling the truth.

“I am sorry, but could you please put away the plate? I will prepare the beds.”

“Uh, yeah, I got it. Umm, I won’t do anything, so don’t worry.”

“…You saying that only makes me worry more.”

Struck again by that hard voice, Subaru dejectedly left the tent to deal with the plate.

There were campfires visible here and there around the camp in the darkness. Subaru had not been given any orders, but there were people who would be on guard duty through the night.

He only knew of it from manga and games, but preparing for war was a difficult thing.

“…I’d like to get away from here as soon as possible.”

Todd was an amiable guy, but Subaru couldn’t get used to the feel of the battlefield.

He wanted to leave as soon as possible, and find a way to meet back up with Emilia and the others.

Having come to that decision, Subaru clenched the plate, then noticed something.

“…Huh? My fingers don’t hurt. Is that because the medicine’s already working?”

Subaru looked at his left hand and was surprised by the medicine’s effects. His hand did not feel quite right yet, but the fact that he could feel warmth again was proof that his hand was starting to work again.

“We were talking about healing magic and all, but this medicine is pretty damn fast, too…”

Thinking back to his conversation with Todd, Subaru shook his left hand a little and then started walking.

There were a lot of things he needed to think about. About Rem, about Louis, and about himself.

There’s a lot to do, but let’s try and improve things one step at a time.

As long as things can improve bit by bit, just like my hand, it will be fine.

5

And so, the next day, having resolved to improve things bit by bit and work toward a solution to their problems…

“…Coming in to work to see this is pretty hard.”

Subaru scratched his head with a sigh as he looked around the inside of the scrambled tent.

Subaru had been ready to continue the chore he'd been assigned by Todd, which was tidying up the black tents, but he had run aground before he could even start working again.

It was nothing, just—the tent he'd worked so hard to clean up the other day had had its packed bags tossed all over the place again, and it was even more of a mess than before.

"Even if everyone in the empire was messy beyond belief, it still shouldn't end up like this…meaning this is harassment."

"Aaauh."

"Right—there's the possibility it was you revealing your true nature, eh, Archbishop?"

"Uuuh?"

Picking the scattered things up again, he glared at Louis, who was staring at his hands. But she just bit her own finger and ignored Subaru's question.

"…And how should I take what Rem said yesterday?"

Louis had tottered around following him this morning, as soon as she'd woken up.

He could remember Rem's grim look before she'd gone off on her own to work on rehabilitating her legs, but Louis was already getting in his way, so he couldn't help protesting.

Either way, what Rem had said last night—about not sensing any miasma from Louis—that whole tangent was bothering him.

"There's no way an Archbishop doesn't have miasma coming off them. But Rem can't sense any from you. So what's the deal…?"

"Aooh?"

While Subaru was at a loss, Louis looked dumbly up at him and made noises.

Sighing at it all, Subaru started seriously working on cleaning up the tent. It was not Louis who had messed everything up; it was probably some soldier in the camp. Todd had acknowledged being an outlier, and he was right—most of the empire's soldiers were not friendly to Subaru.

"But it's better than getting beat up out of nowhere or having a shoe shoved in my mouth."

He could tell his standards for happiness were slipping, but he was used to people thinking he was a nuisance. He had messed up his high school debut and spent almost two years feeling out of

place in class. There had not been much active bullying, but he was used to the bitter treatment.

Thinking about it, he even thought his old classmates had been sensible about it.

“I hope all of you kind people are having a good life over there. Inahata in particular—always going to the effort of bringing me printouts. Hope you make it big.”

Remembering the classmates whose faces were just fuzzy recollections at this point, Subaru undid the setback to his work. It was like digging out a hole that had just been refilled, so it couldn’t even be called net zero.

In the past, Emilia had said something about people seeing you work hard, but…

“At the moment, you’re the only one watching, and that’s not enough to motivate me. If Rem at least was watching, it would be different, but…”

“Ooh, uaah.”

Maybe having learned a bit of a lesson from how Subaru had gotten angry, today Louis was not really getting in the way of his work. That, at least, was a relief. Subaru stepped outside to move to the next tent, when…

“Whoooa?!”

Just as he stepped outside, his foot caught on something, and he fell forward. He caught himself reflexively on the ground, and there was a slight ache in his left hand. It was starting to heal, but still needed some time. Grimacing at the pain, Subaru looked around.

“You’re…”

His eyes widened as he saw the epitome of a vulgar man standing beside the entrance of the tent.

With an eye patch over his right eye and a rough five-o’clock shadow, the man looked like the very epitome of a ruffian, and he was also the person who had shoved his boot in Subaru’s mouth the other day.

“If I remember correctly, you’re Jamal… Gah?!”

“Show some respect. You and that girl with you still don’t know your place.”

The moment he’d judged Subaru had not shown him enough respect, Jamal shifted directly into action.

He stepped on Subaru’s splinted and bandaged hand, grinding

his heel into it.

"Aauuuh!"

Louis clung to Jamal's foot with a shout. But she was light—she couldn't budge him. He grabbed Louis's long hair and forcefully tore her away from his leg.

That made Subaru snap.

"Hey! She's just a kid!"

"What about it? And from what I hear, you're pretty damn cold toward the brat yourself. You suddenly find a new religion or something?"

"I… That's too much, you're gonna regret it."

"Don't waste my time. At least come up with a better excuse."

Jamal snorted and threw Louis to the ground. Rolling around on the floor, Louis grabbed her hair and held her head with a groan while glaring tearfully at Jamal.

"Undisciplined little brat. All three of you are a pain in the ass!"

"Guoh!"

Growing more annoyed as he talked, Jamal then kicked Subaru in the side of the head. Subaru had opened his mouth without thinking, and his teeth cut the inside of his mouth, which caused blood to start flowing.

"Bleh… Todd promised us that we would be protected, and that we could stay here, but…"

Subaru's voice was ragged as Jamal stepped toward him.

"Ha—Todd, huh? As it happens, I'm higher rank than he is. It's not like I won't listen to his requests, but that doesn't mean I have to do what he says."

Subaru immediately curled up to protect his head, but this time, the kick landed in his stomach. Jamal's toes pushed into Subaru's stomach as he relentlessly kicked Subaru, who groaned at the impact.

"First, two of my men got busted up by your girl down by the river. Then I had to send those useless humps back and got chewed out for it. Then when I wanted to settle up over it…that fucker Todd had to go find that damn knife."

"Ngh!!"

"If it weren't for that, I'd have torn you to pieces. It's rough being a soldier, you see."

Relentless kicks while he tried to set Subaru off with his words.

Even without looking up, it was clear what Jamal was trying to

do. He did not just want to hurt Subaru; it was more than that. He wanted Subaru to react to the provocations so that he had an excuse to take it further.

Jamal said he did not have to listen to Todd, but it was clear from Subaru's very first interaction with the boot that he couldn't totally ignore Todd, either.

So Jamal wanted a reason, an excuse to kill Subaru. And also a reason to retaliate against Rem. In which case, Subaru wouldn't rise to the provocation.

If it was to keep Jamal's maliciousness from targeting Rem, even if his fingers were rebroken, even if all the rest of his fingers were broken—he would win.

If it was for that, he would hold on. Hold on as long as it took…

"—Hey, what's going on over there?"

And as Subaru continued to endure, another voice rang out. Jamal scoffed and pulled his leg away, slowly stepping back.

And then, accompanied by the sound of footsteps, an orange-haired man appeared—it was Todd.

"I heard you came over here, even though you didn't have to. So it was for this?"

"Todd? You're awfully protective. You that interested in that knife? Enough to curry favor with a coward like him?"

Jamal scoffed, and Todd's expression grew serious. A dangerous mood filled the air between them, but then Jamal put an end to it.

"Screw it. You better learn to watch your feet when I'm around. If you fall like this again, who knows what'll happen? Ha-ha-ha-ha."

And then, acting like he had done nothing to Subaru, he walked past Todd.

Subaru did not have anything to say to stop him. If he'd complained about it, it would have been the same as rising to Jamal's provocation.

Subaru waited for Jamal to disappear from view, then sat up.

"Aaagh… Damn it, that hurts… Man, he's vicious…"

"You all right? Getting mixed up with Jamal is some bad luck."

Todd grimaced as Subaru stood up unsteadily. If it had not been for Todd, Jamal would still have been at it.

I'm grateful for him stopping that, but…

"I'm fine. More importantly, what about Rem…?"

"The missy is helping out with cooking. She's good with her hands if she can sit in a chair. Jamal won't do anything with other

people around…I think."

However, his words lacked the confidence to be able to reassure Subaru.

Wiping the blood from his mouth, Subaru looked at his left hand.

The splint was broken, and the bandages had come undone. The fingers that had been healed up were now starting to turn a nasty color again.

"Oof… Looks like we'll have to take care of that again. Damn it, Jamal."

"…What's with him?"

"Jamal? Became a soldier at the same time as me. Brightest future of the bunch, too. A lower-tier noble, but with a real shot of making it to general third-class, even… Ah, do you know what that means?"

"No. That a rank or something?"

Subaru shook his head.

Todd nodded and held up his finger.

From his explanation, there were certain ranks for officers in Volakia's army. There was private, private first-class, general third-class, general second-class, all the way up to…

"General first-class is a different level, and there are only nine in the whole empire. They're the emperor's personal warriors, called the Nine Divine Generals. Reaching that level isn't just a matter of family or achievements, though."

"Skill, too?"

"Yeah. So average folks like us aim to get to general third-class."

Hearing Todd's simple explanation, Subaru thought back to Jamal's behavior.

The term "general" implied a role as an officer in the army, but Jamal did not really seem like that kind of a person. Selfish and lacking in empathy, he was more likely to be the archetypal incompetent officer.

"You should warn him, Todd. I hear that lots of soldiers on the battlefield die from a stray arrow to the back."

"That's a scary thought. So what do you want to do about first aid?"

"Can I ask for some? …Right after I check in with Rem."

"Sheesh, head over heels, aren't you…? I feel bad for this little

lady.”

Even with the pain in his fingers, he had to make sure Rem was safe first. That was Subaru’s stance, but Todd shrugged and looked over at Louis, who was curled up in front of the tent.

Her fingers were wrapped in the hair Jamal had pulled, and she was growling like a wild animal.

“Looks like you don’t like letting things go, huh? I appreciate a kid who doesn’t like to lose.”

“Aah! Uuh, aah!”

Louis howled, as if answering Todd’s smile.

Subaru started to say, “You can have her if you like her,” but he did not want to have to deal with Rem’s anger if she heard about it, so he zipped his lips.

6

“—That smell—did you hurt yourself even more?”

“Ugh. You can tell?”

“I can. A child is watching you, so bear that in mind,” Rem reminded him as they sat around the same lunch table.

He couldn’t bring himself to accept the implicit advice, but there was nothing to be gained by arguing, either, so he just nodded. And, sitting beside him, Louis nodded as well, copying him.

Lunch at the camp worked on a ration system. Line up at the distribution center, pick up your food, eat, then clean up after yourself. Rem was helping out with food service, so she was in the last group to eat, meaning they had a late lunch.

Of course, given that they were outsiders, the food itself was just leftovers.

“Not that we can complain too much. Just having something to eat is good enough.”

Subaru carried his and Rem’s share and set them down on a small table at the edge of the space. Louis had impudently taken her own share, just like Subaru.

“What have you been doing? Nothing too hard, right?”

“Not particularly. They were considerate of my legs as well… I only helped a little bit with cooking. While being taught along the way.”

“Taught… Did that bring back any memories?”

“…It would be a lie to say I did not have some hopes of that.”

Rem's blue eyes narrowed, and her lips pursed at Subaru's immediate question. Seeing that reaction, he worried he was pushing too hard, but Rem slowly shook her head.

"I tried several things, thinking there might be something that felt familiar. But that would have been too convenient."

Looking down at her hands, Rem sounded embarrassed by her shallow hopes.

But who could call her hopes shallow? Who could do that, seeing her grasping for an answer when she couldn't remember the building blocks of herself?

"…Why do you have such a pained look on your face?"

"Why? I…" Subaru looked down.

"…Did you not say just last night that you would wait for me to be ready?"

He was stunned by her response. It sounded like the first hint of compromise from Rem. Enough to make the seed of hope sprout in his breast.

However…

"As I said yesterday, no matter how many times you call me Rem, I cannot accept that as my name. No matter what you might say."

"Ugh…"

"Perhaps it would be different coming from her."

Rem's eyes softened, and she rubbed Louis's head. Louis just let her do it, focused on taking care of the food in front of her that she had obtained for herself.

Unfortunately, even if Louis had been in her right mind, she couldn't say anything about Rem. And even if she could, Subaru wouldn't let her. The animosity that he just couldn't shake wouldn't let him.

"What's with the long face? This is a gloomy table."

Todd casually interrupted their meal.

Feeling like Todd might brighten the awkward mood some, Subaru welcomed the man who sat down next to him. *Just earlier, and before that, too. He's been a huge help.*

"I appreciate you taking the time, but are you all right not eating with your men?"

"Hmm? I've known them a pretty long time; a day or two not eating together won't change things between us. I figured I should make a new friend."

“Not like I’ve got anything I can pay you back with.”

“You can repay it later. Think of this as an investment.”

Todd lightened the mood with his easy wit, then wrapped an arm around Subaru’s shoulder.

“Still, though,” he whispered in Subaru’s ear. “Looks like you’re getting along better than you were last night. Did you manage to make up?”

“…It’s hard to tell. I wanna say my sincerity has gotten through a little, at least.”

“…I can hear you. If you believe I have lowered my guard, you are mistaken.”

“Uguu!”

Rem made her dissatisfaction with their conversation known. She wiped Louis’s mouth, and the girl seemed to be in tune with Rem, as if siding with her.

Subaru had complicated feelings about seeing them so intimate, and his expression visibly sank.

“Don’t get so down. At least she’s someplace where you can talk with her like this. Compared to me, that’s already a big improvement.”

“Ah, oh yeah—you talked about being separated from your fiancée.”

“Yeah, she lives in the capital. That’s why I have to finish up this mission. We’ve been apart too long. Whoo, it’s lonely, I tell you.”

“Is that why you’re looking after us?”

“Yeah. So just let me use you guys for a bit. Make it worth the effort.”

Maybe Todd had only said that to keep him from feeling anxious, but Subaru was genuinely grateful for Todd’s consideration. It would have been tactless to just thank him directly. And Todd seemed to recognize that, too.

The four of them ate with that sort of mood about them, and then…

“You mentioned us being able to catch a ride with the resupply wagon, but how long do you think this mission will take you guys?”

“I told you—until we can find the people of Shudrak hiding in the jungle… If we don’t find them, we might be left out here for years,” Todd said glumly. “Serving the court isn’t easy.”

“People of Shudrak…”

Subaru thought for a bit as he held the wooden spoon in his mouth.

The people of Shudrak—when he'd first heard about them from Todd, Subaru had wondered if this maybe referred to the masked man he had met in the jungle earlier. Subaru owed the guy for the knife, so he had not mentioned him to Todd, but now that felt a bit ungrateful.

At this point, Todd had done at least as much for Subaru as the masked man had.

So how did it make sense to repay the masked man, but not Todd?

"Hey, Todd, what are you guys going to do when you find them? You've got a camp like this set up…so are you going to fight?"

He tried to do his best to feign simple curiosity. But he couldn't totally hide the tension in his voice and body language. It wasn't exactly a natural subject to bring up, and Rem's expression changed when she heard it, too. Even if he was conspicuously ignoring it, she had an evasive reaction to the word *fight*.

Todd closed an eye.

"The generals seem to prefer not fighting if they can avoid it. The Shudrak are a pretty powerful tribe, apparently. It would be a difficult fight if it came to it, so it seems like negotiations are the goal."

"Negotiations? With a jungle tribe?"

"Don't go asking a grunt for strategy! …It's not like I really know, but probably swearing fealty to the capital, and by extension the emperor, I guess?"

"The Shudrak people haven't submitted to the emperor?"

"Some people don't. That's just the Volakian way, though, isn't it?"

Subaru just answered with a "Hail Volakia" to Todd's soldierly smile.

If Todd was right, then the imperial army would rather not fight the Shudrak. *In which case, sharing what I know with them might help avoid needless fighting.*

But what he knew was not really that big anyway, and if he brought up why he'd concealed it, he would also have to come clean about misrepresenting who he was.

"Uggh, this is hard. Either way is a problem…"

"…It feels like you've got a few more wrinkles than usual. It's not like you have the nicest face in the world to begin with—should you not at least try to smile?"

"That is a painful reminder! …Would you be nicer to me if I was all smiles, all the time?"

"Huh?"

Rem's genuinely perplexed response quickly broke Subaru's heart.

Todd laughed as Subaru's smile twitched and his shoulders slumped. It was upsetting being laughed at, but it was also true that he felt relieved that Todd was dealing with him like that. The reason why this situation had not gotten too heavy to bear was undeniably thanks to Todd.

Which is all the more reason I would like their mission here to be finished up sooner, but…

"When were you going to start seriously going through the jungle?"

"Word is, once the other camps are all set, we all go in at once. The jungle is big and deep. Who knows how much ground we can even cover in a single day…?"

"I see. Well, it's not like it will go smoothly anyway. You never know what you'll find in there. It's the sort of place that would probably have big demon beasts, too."

Subaru suspected that the masked man might have been a Shudrak. The other possibility was the hunter being one. And then there was the giant snake demon beast that had appeared during the encounter with the hunter. And it was possible to run into any number of Rem's leftover traps, too.

With all that in mind, it was easy to guess that Todd and the soldiers would have a rough time in the forest.

Even if I can't explain the situation, I should at least mention Rem's traps. They'll cause unnecessary problems…

"Demon beasts?"

But as he was thinking that, Todd's eyes widened, his cup of water still at his lips. Wiping the water from the corner of his mouth, he looked at Subaru in shock.

"Did you just say 'demon beasts'? There are demon beasts in that jungle?"

"Eh? Um, I mean, I did… What, did I say something strange?"

"Well, yeah, demon beasts aren't the sort of thing you run into

every day. Maybe in the demon beast capital, Lugunica, but we're not even near the border."

"_____"

"You're kidding…right? Hey, missy."

Todd's voice grew more serious, and Subaru couldn't say a word as he was just confused. So Todd turned his attention to Rem.

"Tell me, please. Did you see a demon beast, too? In the Badheim Jungle out there?"

"If you mean a large creature with green skin, then I did."

"Was there a horn on its head?"

"A horn? …Yes…a white and twisted one."

The moment he heard that, Todd spun around to face Subaru.

"What sort of demon beast was it? Do you have a description?"

"A-a snake. A giant snake. Maybe thirty feet long. One big demon beast."

"One, huh…? Damn it. There's no way to know if there really is just one in this giant jungle. But you don't seem to be lying. That changes things!"

As he scratched his head roughly, Todd's expression had completely changed. He turned away from them, but before he started running, he turned back.

"Right—that was really valuable information. If it weren't for that, things might have gotten bad. Thanks."

"…Sure."

"Gather the squad leaders! I'm getting the general! This is big!"

After letting a little smile break through the grimness, Todd clapped his hands and got everyone's attention, then headed to the tent in the center of the camp—which was most likely the command tent where strategy meetings were held.

Subaru watched him leave in a furious rush, half in shock.

"…That was quite the reaction. That creature…demon beast…is it really so important? I understand it is a dangerous creature, of course, but…"

"…No, maybe I didn't fully appreciate its danger, either."

"Haah…"

Rem sounded, well…*suspicious* was probably the right word, and Subaru had not quite managed to wrap his head around all of it, either. That was just how out of left field Todd's reaction had been.

"I guess demon beasts are rare in the empire…"

That was completely unexpected, and honestly something he couldn't even have imagined.

Demon beasts were inextricably bound up with his new life in another world. Setting the first day aside, demon beasts had played a big part in most of the events that had followed.

Meili's demon beast mess, Ulgarm, the White Whale battle to fulfill Wilhelm's wish, and the rabbits trying to consume the Sanctuary.

There had not been demon beasts in Pristella, but Auguria and the Pleiades Watchtower, where they'd gone to deal with the aftermath of Pristella, had been swarming with demon beasts.

And the most memorable demon beast of them all to Subaru—the crimson scorpion.

"Got a little heavy there, but I never really thought of demon beasts as rare."

He had just seen them like the monsters in a video game RPG—creatures that just sort of appeared everywhere around the world. But apparently this was not the case.

Thinking back on it, it was not like lions or giraffes existed everywhere in his original world, either, so it would probably have been obvious if he had just thought about it.

"This is the first I've heard of Lugunica being the demon beast capital…"

Even if it was a powerful creature, just the mention of a single demon beast had been enough to totally change the look on Todd's face. Judging from that difference in their views of demon beasts, it wasn't that strange for Lugunica to be called the demon beast capital.

Meili, with her ability to control demon beasts, was probably like something out of a fairy tale.

"Then if she went to a country without that many demon beasts, maybe she would be able to live like a normal girl…"

"Um, pardon me."

As he thought about Meili and her future, Rem suddenly interrupted, a thoughtful look on her face.

He glanced at her, and she pointed at the table. Looking down, he saw Louis sleeping there, having finished her lunch.

"It seems she is satisfied now that she is full… I resent it, but could I ask you to carry her?"

"You don't have to be that harsh…"

Grimacing a bit, Subaru reluctantly picked Louis up.

She occasionally clung to him, so he already knew this would be the case, but she was light. She looked like nothing more than a normal girl. And at least in appearance, she really was just a normal girl.

"Are you all right, Rem? My back is free…"

"What do you take me for? I can at least manage myself."

Rem took up the wooden staff—basically just a thick tree branch she had picked up somewhere—which was leaning against the table. There was cloth wrapped around the grip, turning it into a simple staff. Using that, Rem stood up.

Her steps were still not very steady, but…

"I…am fine."

"…Really? You don't have to force yourself. Just rely on me if you need help."

"I will not. I am fine with this much. Just do not drop her."

"Haaah. I got it. But just remember, I'm not doing this because I want to, I'm doing it for you."

"What makes you feel the need to say that…?"

Rem was clearly exasperated by Subaru, who just couldn't help doing everything he could to make sure no one thought he was actually getting along with Louis. Taking her staff, she slowly followed Subaru.

After taking Rem and Louis back to the tent they were borrowing, Subaru would get back to work cleaning up the tents. — *I am curious about Todd and the others, though.*

"…Curious about them?"

"…Hmm? Ah, yeah, sort of. I mean, I feel like I've been a bit ungrateful to someone I owe big time. And talking about demon beasts might have been unnecessary."

"…Someone you owe?"

Subaru was feeling down, like he was a villain who kept lying about everything. But having heard those words, Rem then sounded as though she were deep in thought.

"Rem?"

"…No, it is nothing. Please pay me no mind."

"No, I mean, that's asking a bit much, after that…"

"Really? Then please do not speak to me."

"You're getting further and further away from me! If you were about to say something, then just say it! I'm curious!"

He adjusted his speed to match hers, which made for slow progress. Rem, seemingly annoyed by his doing so, let out a little sigh.

"Umm, that Todd, was it? …I do not have a particularly good impression of him."

"Huh? Why not? He let us stay here when we didn't have anything to fall back on, and he protected me from that nasty beast. Not feeling any gratitude at all for that is a little…"

"I did not say I did not feel grateful. I am grateful. However…"

She seemed hesitant to continue. But after a couple seconds of silence, she let out a deep breath and said it.

"It is difficult for me to trust someone who makes no effort to ask someone's name."

Subaru's breath caught in his throat.

He was about to ask her what she was talking about, but then he thought about it.

Someone who makes no effort to ask someone's name.

Thinking back on it, she's right.

Todd had not once called Subaru by name. All he said was "you." And it was natural for him to do this if he did not know Subaru's name.

"B-but isn't that just coincidence? You never say my name ei—"

"Subaru Natsuki. Knowing it but not saying it is not the same as never attempting to learn it. That is all."

"_____"

"Those are my thoughts on the matter. Either way, we have no choice but to rely on them."

With that, Rem moved past Subaru, who had stopped moving.

Watching her slowly inch forward, Subaru couldn't say anything.

Unfortunately, he did not have the skill to melt her stubborn heart. And as had become obvious with the demon beast incident, Subaru was not really aware of what constituted common knowledge in this world. He was not even up to snuff in the kingdom, so the empire was as good as uncharted territory.

There might even have been a different significance attached to whether you asked for someone's name here in Volakia. Maybe it was rude to ask for someone's name before introducing yourself, or something.

But even if there were a rule like that, Subaru couldn't explain

it to Rem. He could only regret his lack of knowledge and education.

"…How long are you going to keep standing there?"

"Ah…"

Looking up, he saw Rem had turned around from a little further ahead.

She had a mildly impatient look on her face and was glaring at Subaru while resting both her hands on the staff. His heart ached at the sight of her waiting for him like that.

"Gh…"

"Wh… What is it?! Did your fingers…?"

"No, just the thought of you waiting for me, it just…"

"…I shall not say what, but something just went to waste."

Unamused, Rem turned her back on Subaru again.

Chasing quickly after her, Subaru apologized, then thought back on what she had just said, his eyes narrowed.

He told himself that it was just Rem overthinking things.

7

—And the doubt that had started to grow in Subaru's breast was cleared up the next day.

"—Hey, wake up. How long are you going to keep sleeping?"

Subaru was shaken out of sleep by a hand on his shoulder.

"Nn?"

Waking up easily was one Subaru's few good traits, but waking up yourself and having someone wake you up were two different things. Trying to get his heavy head into motion, he opened his eyes and saw Todd's face.

"…Todd?"

"Yeah, you look tired. Makes sense, I guess, given you were doing work you aren't used to. Either way, though, thanks to you…"

"…Subaru Natsuki."

"Hmm?"

Todd was speaking quickly as Subaru slowly sat up. But when Subaru suddenly said his own name, Todd's eyes widened slightly. For a second, Todd seemed confused.

"Subaru Natsuki—that's my name."

“Hmm… Ahh, did it bother you that I wasn’t calling you by name?”

“Nah, it’s not that, but…I realized I hadn’t introduced myself, and thought I might have done something really rude.”

“Ha-ha, you’re overthinking things. But it’s Subaru Natsuki, huh? I’ll remember that.”

Subaru gave a weak smile and looked down a bit awkwardly, but Todd just clapped him on the shoulder. It came as a huge relief to Subaru that Todd wasn’t acting any different.

Apparently, Rem’s concerns from the previous day had just been her overthinking things, and Subaru’s gloom had been unnecessary, too.

“Messed up there,” Todd muttered to himself—it seemed he’d just forgotten to ask for Subaru’s name before. “Anyway, that’s important, but I’ve got something even bigger to tell you. Thanks to what you mentioned yesterday, the generals have changed strategy.”

“Strategy… For dealing with the jungle?”

“That’s right. Venturing into unexplored jungle is a different story if there are demon beasts crawling around inside it. Our losses would be nothing to sneeze at. So…”

Todd was wearing a big, satisfied smile as he grabbed Subaru’s face in both hands.

“…they’ve decided to wrap up this mission nice and quick.”

“Nice and quick? So you’ll be able to go back to your fiancée, then?”

“Ha-ha, that’s right!” Todd nodded happily.

Subaru cheered, too.

Todd’s joy about having a deployment that was supposed to last for years changed so that he could return home was enormous. Grabbing each other’s hands, Subaru and Todd danced around in the middle of the tent.

And as they were doing that, naturally…

“…Um, could you quiet down a little, please?”

“Ah, sorry, Rem.”

Rem was sitting up and glaring unhappily at the both of them.

“Goodness,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “—? Is there a strange smell?”

“Smell?”

“Yes—one besides your body odor.”

Rem sniffed, then flapped her hand as if trying to clear the air. Subaru was, of course, hurt by the gesture, but Todd quickly apologized.

"Sorry, sorry. I figured it would be fine given the distance, but with a good nose you can tell. But once something's been decided, it doesn't feel right to just sit around doing nothing, right?"

"Todd?"

Todd pulled back the flap of their tent and beckoned them outside.

Subaru met Rem's gaze, then gave her her wooden staff, and went over to the tent entrance. He stood next to Todd, and then he saw it.

"…Huh?"

Dense black smoke was billowing into the sky, and there was a powerful charred smell.

Badheim Jungle—the great jungle that extended as far as the eye could see—was being consumed by brilliant flames that were becoming an inferno.

"This is…"

Rem was struck speechless, too, at the sight of it.

They stood next to each other in shock, watching the burning trees—the jungle inferno, the world ending before their eyes, like a nightmare come to life.

"If demon beasts are lurking in there, there's no telling how many people we'll lose. The commander, General Second-Class Zickle, came around once he learned that."

"_____"

"Thanks to your information, we can wrap this up without having to lose anyone. You've been a great help."

Todd smiled and gave Subaru a smack on the back. Subaru's lips trembled as that friendly slap landed. His lungs trembled. His throat trembled. And his voice trembled.

While Todd was acting just as friendly as ever, Subaru asked in a quivering voice…

"Wh-why…?"

"Why…what?"

"You said they didn't want to fight the Shudrak in the jungle, right?"

Todd had said it would be a difficult battle, if it came to that, and that they were hoping to negotiate the enemy's submission to

the emperor. That was what he had told them at lunch the day before. That was why Subaru had been relieved there wouldn't be a fight.

"This is…"

"Yeah—they didn't want to fight. There was no way to know how many losses we would suffer. Even I could have died. But that tidbit about the demon beasts was enough to convince the general, so the problem's settled. The Shudrak won't be able to go against the emperor this way, either."

“—!”

“And I’ll be able to get back to my fiancée soon, too. Seriously, you were quite the find. I told the general about you, so I’m sure you’ll receive an award, too. You might even get a second one of those knives,” Todd said jokingly, giving Subaru another slap on the back.

And then, as if remembering something, he added:

“Right—I was told to get back after I’d showed you what you’ve accomplished. Also, you don’t have to worry about cleaning up those tents anymore. We’ll be breaking camp here before too long.”

“—Aah, eh?”

“C’mon, man, get a hold of yourself. Don’t worry the little lady.”

With that final whisper in Subaru’s ear, Todd left, wearing a genuinely well-intentioned smile.

In the end, Subaru couldn’t say anything as Todd went away.

But as quiet as he might have been, and as much as his mind was ravaged by confusion, it did nothing to change the hellish inferno blazing in front of them.

The flames consumed everything; they would scorch every living thing in that area. That giant snake, the masked man who had been camping in the forest, and the hunter who had taken aim at them. They would all be turned to ash.

“Ngh!”

As Subaru gritted his teeth at the impact of that thought, Rem—who was standing beside him—staggered.

He immediately reached out to support her, but the moment he touched her, her body went tense. Looking up at him, her face was filled with terror and rejection.

“Aaah…”

“I know it isn’t your fault… I know. But…”

“_____”

“Please don’t touch me.”

Biting back the fear that threatened to consume her, Rem gently pushed Subaru’s hand away. She didn’t shake him off, nor did she break his hand. She simply brushed him off.

She was saying what she really felt. Rem understood that Subaru had not meant for this to happen. But that was a trifling

consolation.

In the face of what had, in fact, happened, it was all too trifling…

"…She's woken up."

Rem looked away from Subaru, averting her eyes from the blazing jungle, and turned to Louis, who was inside the tent, to avoid looking at something she did not want to see.

Behind her, Subaru couldn't respond immediately.

He had not come to terms with what had happened himself. Everything he could think to say felt wrong.

So he couldn't stop Rem from moving away at a crawl.

He couldn't stop her…

"—Ah?"

As he bit his lip and gazed at Rem's back after having been rejected, Subaru suddenly felt something small hit his back.

Turning around to see what it was, he couldn't see anyone or anything there that might have touched his back. But then he noticed something just barely out of the corner of his eye.

Something that moved when he moved as he kept turning around…

"Uuuh!!"

The next moment, Louis shouted from inside the tent like a child throwing a tantrum.

But there were more important things to deal with than a noisy Archbishop having a fit after waking up, an Archbishop who was like a toddler now. Though it wasn't like there was anything he could do about her making a fuss.

"Uaah, aaaah!!!"

"Ngh! Be quiet! Everything's fine! I don't have time to deal with —"

As he was shouting at Louis, Subaru's brow furrowed.

Rem was seated on the ground holding Louis, who was still fidgeting and struggling. All of a sudden, her expression changed. It was not the fear or rejection she'd displayed before; it was pure and simple shock. She was looking at Subaru with blue eyes gone wide —no, it wasn't Subaru she was looking at, but…

"…My back?"

Subaru figured out where she was looking from the angle of her gaze. Twisting his head, Subaru looked down at his back, and finally realized just what it was that had been moving behind him

while he was turning.

"Arrow feathers…"

That was what had caught his eye. And of course, the arrow feathers were attached to an arrow, and an arrow quivering in his back meant that…

"…Ah."

…someone had shot him in the back with an arrow.

He quickly lost his balance, and, unable to stand anymore, toppled over on the spot. He reflexively grabbed at the tent's entrance as he fell, and the tent tilted as he collapsed.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

Rem let out a shrill cry.

Even as Subaru's mind raced, he had the pointless, out-of-place thought that he had never heard Rem cry out like that before.

"Aaah, uaaah!"

Crawling on all fours, Louis approached Subaru and started roughly shaking him, but he couldn't muster the voice to yell at her to stop, or the strength to resist.

It was just a single arrow.

"Someone! Someone, please! …I-it will be fine! This wound is…"

Letting go of her staff, Rem came closer, almost stumbling over herself in the process, and staring at his back, she called out desperately.

Rem really is nice.

Even though she'd refused to trust him because of the miasma, even though he had caused this inferno with a single ill-considered comment, she still tried to call for help when Subaru collapsed right in front of her.

I can't show her my weakness.

It's just a simple arrow. Show her you can handle it. Just stand up, Subaru Natsuki. You always thought people didn't have enough guts, dying or getting knocked out by those little arrows in Taiga *dramas and period shows and all, didn't you?*

I mean, even if a giant arrow through the chest is different, Rem's right—this arrow didn't hit me that hard. It was so soft, it felt like someone brushing against my back, right?

So why is it that…

He vomited as heat welled up inside him.

"Geh, gh, ugh."

“Ngh! Is it poisoned?”

Rem had come to the same conclusion as him. It was not the impact alone that was killing him. It was the poison that coated the arrowhead.

Subaru couldn’t move his arms or legs, and his head had stopped working, like he had a bad fever. Something spilled from his eyes, from his nose, from his ears, and his whole body started shuddering.

There was an annoying clanging in his ears, and he couldn’t hear Rem’s worried voice. He couldn’t hear Louis’s annoying shouts, either. He’d stopped hearing at all.

Poison. The poison. Someone had… Why? The arrow. The hunter. The forest, burning. Burning. My words… Demon beast, Todd, burning. Rem. Rem. Rem…

His thoughts were jumbled, and he groaned while blowing bubbles of blood out his mouth. Opening bloodshot eyes, he tried to make out Rem’s face, and that was when he noticed it.

—Maybe thirty yards from the tent—not even ten seconds away if he took the distance at a run—was a small shadowy figure, glaring at him.

“_____”

A child. No bigger than Louis.

A child with a nasty look on her face—no, it wasn’t a nasty look. She was glaring at him. Glaring at him, eyes clouded with hate. She clearly wanted him dead.

Her hair and face were covered in soot, and she held a small bow.

She had, by her hands, with her own will, shot a poison arrow at Subaru.

“_____”

It was natural she would hate him.

It was natural she would want to kill him.

What he caused had invited fate to set her on a course of hatred.

Then this was just Subaru’s just deserts…

“No! Wait! Please wait! Wait…”

He could hear a desperate voice in his ears.

I’d love to wait. I’d love to just stop here. I’d love to hold hands and smile.

But I can’t do that.

I can't do anything.

Blowing out more bloody spittle, spasming, with his eyes rolled back into his head, Subaru passed out, vomiting his melting internal organs as he fell into shadow.

"Wai…!"

The hideous, unthinking fool slipped into darkness.

He slipped…

CHAPTER 4

THE IMPERIAL WAY

1

The pain ate away at his body, like his blood had become magma. It peeled layer after layer away from the being that was Subaru Natsuki, revealing his unvarnished self.

The agony persisted, like cold air blowing across an open wound after a scab had just been ripped off it. His soul was exposed to reality, with nothing to protect it.

Was it pain? Grief? Sadness? Or something else entirely? Subaru couldn't even tell that much.

What he did know was that if any relief was possible, there was only one way he'd get it.

Before that hopeless feeling reached its logical conclusion, it suddenly cut out and he felt a sense of release—

"—Pipe down, asshole."

"Mgh."

Set free from his suffering, he opened wide the mouth that had been bubbling with blood.

His body desperately sought oxygen, as if his lungs had a leak, and just as he tried to indulge in that flavorless, unscented treat, something was shoved into his mouth.

Recoiling from the unexpected feeling, Subaru coughed as an angry voice rained down on him.

But he couldn't tell what was happening. Or more precisely, he couldn't see. Feeling pressure on his face, he could tell something was wrapped around it, blocking his vision.

—No, it's not just my face. My arms and legs are tied, too.

Someone had shoved something into his mouth while he was tied up.

"Ugh! Blegh! Wh-why am I tied… Gh?!"

"Why are you resisting, asshole? Don't you understand what position you're in?"

"Ah, gah…"

Right after he'd spit out the foreign object in his mouth, someone kicked him in the stomach. Subaru sucked in air and slumped to the side as his attacker spit on him.

The humiliation of being spit on was nothing in the face of the splitting pain in his chest. But as his darkened vision flashed red with pain, Subaru slipped into confusion.

What had happened just a few minutes ago was still tearing through his mind.

"_____"

He had been woken up by Todd, then brought outside the tent to see the jungle in the grips of fiery hands. And then, right after having realized that this had happened because of a slip of his tongue, he'd been hit in the back with a poison arrow and had collapsed. After seeing the seemingly very young girl who had shot the arrow, he'd lost strength in his body and started spasming.

He'd suffered in agony while coughing up blood, listening as Rem frantically called out for help, had tried to hold on to his fading consciousness, and…

"I'm…here…"

"Huh? How much longer are you gonna—"

"C'mon, now, calm down! He clearly doesn't know anything. Let's at least undo the blindfold."

Confusion swirled, consuming his mind, but the conversation going on overhead brought him back to reality.

He could hear two men. One had a rough, coarse voice, like a man who was the embodiment of vulgarity, and the other had a softer voice, one that seemed friendly enough.

In his mind's eye, Subaru could just see the faces of those two voices' owners.

"Tch."

There were footsteps as the man who'd kicked Subaru backed off. And then came a mildly exasperated sigh.

"Sheesh, sorry about all that. I'm sure you can't really tell what's going on, but I'm going to take off the blindfold for now.

Sorry, but I can't untie your hands or feet."

"_____"

The man walked over to Subaru and undid his blindfold.

There was a little bit of pain and a sense of release. Subaru took a deep breath before indulging in that, though. And then another, and another, before letting his breathing settle down.

Then, after patiently waiting for his vision to gradually come back, he opened his eyes.

And…

"…Just like I thought…"

As his fuzzy vision came into focus, he saw tents and campfires spread out before him, and imperial soldiers bustling all around. It was not exactly familiar, but he recognized the army camp—he had run all around it doing chores and getting by for a couple days.

"…I…died?"

And returned by death. That's the most natural explanation.

And with bitter irony, he knew an easy way to make sure of that. He just needed to turn his head a little and see the green jungle on the other side of the camp.

As a result of what he'd said before, the imperial soldiers had gotten permission to burn down the jungle. But the jungle that was supposed to be scorched by hellfire was still there, and still green. It extended across the horizon and looked just fine.

Having confirmed that, Subaru now saw it clearly in his head. Rem crawling toward him after he'd collapsed from the arrow as blood bubbled from his mouth, desperately pleading with him not to die. Her voice, her presence, her plea.

But Subaru had betrayed all of this, dying tragically right in front of her.

How much fear, how much uncertainty had Rem felt, not remembering anything, in some unknown land, watching a man who knew her die, even if she did hate him? The thought of it made his heart ache.

And at the same time…

I'll never let her experience that again.

"We found you when we went to fetch some water. Sorry, but you're our prisoner."

As Subaru's heart filled with powerful emotions, a man crouched down in front of him.

He knew the man who was looking at him with a gentle smile

and kind expression—Todd. In this camp filled with imperial soldiers, he was the one and only person who had been friendly to Subaru and Rem.

He had patiently dealt with Subaru, who knew far too little about the empire, and Subaru himself was grateful that Todd had been there when he'd woken up.

Todd, who'd supported the decision to burn the jungle on the basis of Subaru's words.

"_____"

It did not feel like it had even been ten minutes, but a chill ran down his back when he recalled Todd's carefree report that they were burning the jungle.

The Empire of Volakia respected the strong and tyrannized the weak. A powerful country whose national crest was a wolf with swords thrust into it, a symbol that taught only the swordwolf had the right to live. People with Todd's mentality were probably not uncommon in the empire.

The empire had a way of life that let its people quickly accept and casually carry out a plan to burn down a jungle after hearing there were demon beasts in it.

Of course, Subaru did not see eye to eye with the people in Lugunica, either. The closest he came to that was maybe Roswaal, that pinnacle of rationalism.

Either way, Subaru was not going to let them turn the jungle into scorched earth this time.

"_____"

Gulping, Subaru grasped the mistake he had made last time.

Of course, he had been killed as a result, but even if the army had made the decision for the safety of their forces, burning down the jungle was way too drastic. If it had not been for Subaru's comment, there was a chance Todd and the empire would have been able to negotiate in peace with the Shudrak people and resolve things without bloodshed.

He had robbed them of that possibility and exposed everyone in the jungle to danger— *No, don't try to shirk responsibility. There's zero chance no one died in that firestorm.*

Because of what he'd said, the people living in the jungle had died.

Even if he could no longer influence the events of that world after dying and returning, there was no escaping that fact. He

would never forget it.

"_____"

And so he resolved not to make the same mistake.

Death was a heavy matter, whether it was his own or someone else's, and not something he could let happen again. With that thought, getting at least the chance to redo his first encounter with Jamal and Todd was a faint silver lining.

I'll build a good relationship with Todd, and Jamal, too, if possible, and push them toward negotiating with the Shudrak in a way that won't fail.

And to do that…

"You listening? I get you're confused at suddenly finding yourself a prisoner, but…"

Todd crouched down in front of Subaru, who had been keeping quiet, seemingly considering what Subaru must have been feeling.

"…Yeah… You're right. I'm confused. I am. But, umm…"

Subaru thought hard about what to say next.

Last time, his relationship with Todd had been friendly. He felt he should try to maintain that, while keeping open the possibility of gaining accommodations for himself and Rem.

Also, I have to be careful with what I tell him, to avoid any extreme actions on his part.

"I'm surprised, but I get that I'm a prisoner. I remember jumping into the river. If you're the ones who saved me from that, then I owe you—"

"Wait."

"Huh?"

Subaru calmly tried to perform the role of someone who had been pulled out of the water and saved. But Todd interrupted him, putting his hand in front of Subaru's face.

Subaru gulped as the open palm blocked his vision.

And then…

"Why did you look at me like that just now?"

Right after he heard Todd's cold, stiff voice, something sharp slid into his right shoulder.

Unable to see, he was slow to react to what had happened. Then, feeling a strange sensation in his shoulder, he looked at it and realized what it was.

—The sharp blade of a knife was stabbing into his shoulder.

“_____ghhh?!”

The moment Subaru saw what had happened, a howl rose in the back of his throat.

A terrible heat erupted from the center of his shoulder, and a sharp pain and a tingling sensation spread through him.

The shock of being unexpectedly stabbed was enormous.

“Ghh, gaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

A few seconds later, a clear and obvious cry of pain passed his lips.

He wanted to twist his body, clutch his stabbed shoulder, put pressure on the wound, or do anything about the pain—but he was bound hand and foot, unable even to pull the knife out of his shoulder. *It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!*

“H-hey! What was that scream?!”

Subaru writhed in pain, screaming over and over. And having heard that, Jamal—the rough man with the eye patch—hurried back.

The eyes of the man who had just been kicking Subaru went wide at the sight of Subaru writhing on the floor, bleeding from where the knife was still sticking out of his shoulder.

And…

“Hey—this isn’t what we talked about, Todd! You’re the one who told me to hold back ’cause he had that noble’s knife!”

“Yeah, that was the plan before we knew his identity. When it comes to that, I can see why you’d be mad about how this hasn’t gone the way we’d discussed. My bad.”

“…Meaning, you know who he is now?”

Todd’s answer convinced Jamal to calm down. But Todd just cocked his head.

“No clue,” he said, before putting his foot on Subaru’s body while Subaru writhed in pain. “I didn’t ask who he was. But it’s likely he’s an enemy, so I attacked preemptively.”

“Gh, gyaaaaah!”

“Oh—that looks painful. Not much point making you suffer too much, but are you the type who can take a lot of pain? How would you rate yourself there?”

Todd leaned onto the leg resting on Subaru’s body while talking to him in a calm voice.

But Subaru was lying on the ground, and the increased pressure on him pushed the knife deeper into his shoulder, so amid the unbearable pain he couldn't come up with a response.

"No response. Defiance. So he is an enemy."

"…With him rolling around like that, he couldn't answer even if he wanted to."

"Hmm? Really? Damn, I don't really feel much pain, so I always mess this sort of thing up. My bad."

Todd finally removed his foot from Subaru's body.

The extra pain faded, but the intermittent agony of having been stabbed was still jabbing at him. Subaru bit down on the pain, which was so difficult to endure, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and tears welling in his eyes.

"And you talk to me about my behavior being bad…"

"—? You beat prisoners and your subordinates just to feel better, right? Don't get judgy with me. I'm just doing what's necessary."

Meanwhile, they continued talking, ignoring Subaru's situation.

It was hard to imagine from what had happened moments ago, but Jamal was trying to pacify Todd after the latter had stabbed Subaru.

What is happening?

Even considering the fact that mental resources were being diverted to deal with the pain, his thoughts were just not making any sense.

Todd had been so good to them, so why would he…?

"So why did you stab him?"

"When he saw me after I took off his blindfold, the look in his eyes was manipulative. Unease or nervousness, I could understand. Fear or tears would have been fine, too. But looking manipulative is weird, right?"

"Manipulative, huh?"

"If you were kicked awake and then had a blindfold taken off, would you be able to think about using the first person you see? I mean, sure, there are some who naturally do that, but they're scary, and dealing with them just means trouble. It's better just to kill them."

Todd coolly explained his thoughts, and Jamal seemed to be considering what he was saying.

The reason he'd stabbed Subaru was because he'd judged

Subaru to be dangerous. And because he thought that the best way to deal with danger was by rendering it powerless.

He had simply made a snap decision for his own safety and acted on it.

What the hell?

"There's no way you can tell if he was thinking that the moment he woke up, right? He might have woken up while we were carrying him and been listening the whole time."

"No. I was watching the whole time to see if he was faking it. If he'd regained consciousness at some point along the way, he should have had some basic biological reaction. And if he somehow managed to fool me…"

"Yeah?"

"Then he was feigning sleep in order to deceive us and was planning to manipulate me from the start. That's even scarier, so it's better to just kill him."

Subaru gulped with a shudder, even as he struggled against the pain.

Jamal's tone softened as he listened to Todd's explanation. He'd been surprised and angry at first at the fact that Todd had stabbed Subaru, but his anger was gradually dissipating.

Todd got close to people, making a point of being understanding, and then he proposed ideas that were beneficial to them. Once their initial momentum slowed down and they became more open to suggestion, those people would then think about Todd's proposal and start coming around to it.

That was what was happening with Jamal here, and it was exactly what had happened with Subaru in his previous run.

"I don't know about the two girls with him, either, but they're easier to deal with. We should nip this potential complication in the bud."

"Well, I don't really mind, but…"

"Or do you want to do it? I stopped you from venting your feelings about that blue-haired girl messing up your men, but you could use something to work through that, right?"

"That's true."

Todd's calm proposal brought a nasty grin to Jamal's face.

Jamal licked his lips and started giving off a more dangerous, violent sort of aura. But what made Subaru freeze up was the way Todd had said this.

He'd offered Subaru up as a way for Jamal to vent, but also, even taking Subaru out of the picture here, Todd still planned to probe their motives in another way. Using Rem, and Louis.

But they wouldn't be able to answer, no matter what he asked them. No matter how badly she was tortured, Rem didn't know anything she could tell him.

"Ngh!"

Gritting his teeth, Subaru used the taste of blood in his mouth as a catalyst, propelling himself forward in search of a way to save Rem.

In just a few more seconds, Jamal's assault would resume, and Subaru would either be killed by these barbaric attacks because he was no longer needed, or he would be left half dead. And even if Jamal had a conscience and didn't finish him off, Todd wouldn't let him live.

Todd had set fire to the jungle, so he would have no qualms about ending Subaru's life.

Jamal approached, step by step.

And in that moment, Subaru's thoughts raced, searching for an answer within himself. A way out, some kind of plan, a possibility, a miracle to—

"Try to gimme a nice scream, brat. You're gonna pay for what your girl d—"

"The Shudrak."

Just before Jamal could unleash himself on Subaru with that classic thug line, Subaru spoke.

Jamal stopped suddenly, and behind him, Todd's expression changed, too. Jamal's surprise was evident, and Todd cocked an eyebrow and chuckled.

"Heh—looks like you know how to gamble."

"Todd, don't listen—"

"Now, now, give it a second, Jamal. You can punch and kick him later. But it's hard to make out what someone says when their throat and mouth are busted up. Let's listen first."

"Fuck!"

Suddenly having lost the outlet for his frustrations, Jamal kicked a nearby wooden shelf. Meanwhile, Todd faced Subaru again, and terrifyingly, the smile plastered across his face was the exact same one that Subaru knew.

As Subaru teetered on the precipice between life and death,

Todd smiled at Subaru in the same way he had while treating Subaru's fingers, while having lunch with him, and while praising him for his contributions to burning the jungle.

"So you brought up the Shudrak people without being prompted to. Is it safe to expect you're about to say something we'd like to hear?"

"…Yeah. I know where the Shudrak people are in the jungle."

"—! Well, that's just great!"

Todd clapped, a trace of joy in his smile.

Seeing that reaction, Subaru was sure that the miracle he had dragged out of himself had worked. But it was a double-edged sword, too—since he did not actually know their location.

The man who had given him the knife, and the hunter who had taken aim at him—he thought it likely that one, the other, or perhaps both were connected to the Shudrak, but he had no way to get in contact with them from here, and no clue where exactly they were.

Which meant Subaru was staking his life on a major gamble.

"Why do you know that?"

"…Because I'm one of them."

"I see—so you really are. Skin color aside, you've got the black hair. So I'd suspected that might be the case. The Shudrak are famous for having black hair."

"_____"

Hearing that, Subaru was greatly relieved and felt a sense of having been saved by luck.

A greasy sweat joined the cold sweat that already coated him from head to toe thanks to the tricky tightrope he was walking. The pain in his shoulder was still growing, and the fingers of his left hand were starting to throb with pain, too.

On top of that, his body had still not recovered from everything that had happened at the Pleiades Watchtower, nor from when he'd chased Rem through the jungle, then escaped into the river.

Holding on as his consciousness wobbled and his mind threatened to give out, he now embarked on an interrogation where any mistake would mean death. All for the sake of survival—all for rescuing Rem.

To return to Emilia and Beatrice, and to reunite Ram and Rem.

"In which case, are you some sort of scout? Are the clothes and knife a disguise so you could blend in with us?"

"…I stole the knife from a traveler. Same for the clothes. And…"

"You tried to slip in to spy on us. That's a bold plan. It looks like you really did almost drown, and there was always the chance of us not noticing the knife…"

"But it feels more realistic this way, right?"

When Todd pointed out the shoddiness of the supposed plan, Subaru laughed it off as intentional.

He curled his lips, flashing his teeth to make his normal appearance look even nastier and lend his explanation even more credence. Todd considered his claims.

"_____"

The silence was heavy, dragging out Subaru's suffering.

In truth, Subaru couldn't say whether his words actually were convincing, or whether his expressions were lending them any weight at all. The pain and the burden on him were so great that he couldn't really reflect objectively on the situation.

He wouldn't have been surprised if Todd had brushed off his excuse with a sneer, and he'd then had his head split open as a cherry on top.

Todd's position being so unreadable just made it all even more nerve-racking.

After a little while…

"Are you selling out your tribe in order to live?"

Todd closed an eye as he asked that question.

Subaru gulped.

He had drawn out the question he had wanted to hear. Now he just had to not mess up the answer.

Selling out his tribe to live. In addition to claiming himself a member of the Shudrak people, he would sell them out.

He couldn't afford to be caught in that bluff, and he needed to make sure his expression and voice were appropriate.

The voice and expression of a pathetic man who would sell out his tribe for his own survival.

"…Y-yeah, that's right. I'll sell them out."

"_____"

"Please, I'll do anything. I'll even lure them out if that's what you want. Anything. Whatever you want!"

Eyes swimming, cheeks tense, coated in a cold sweat, Subaru begged for his life.

He turned into the sort of person who would beg for his life without concern for anyone else. A selfish act that wouldn't endear him to anyone.

It was nothing.

He had seen plenty of examples of that in his time here in this world.

Not that I ever expected to see the day when I would use those awful Archbishops as a model.

"What a piece of shit. I don't like those eyes."

Seeing Subaru's act, Jamal grumbled in heartfelt scorn and anger.

At the very least, Subaru's words had pushed Jamal in a bad direction. But he did not have time to be worrying about Jamal. The person who would decide his fate here was Todd.

Whatever their actual roles and ranks were did not matter here. Not in this moment. So, in accordance with imperial custom, where the strong oppressed the weak…

"…That desperation doesn't look like a lie."

And, while Subaru was carefully performing the act of a groveling man, Todd finally spoke.

Those words made Subaru feel like he'd managed to survive, even as he was wary of rejoicing prematurely.

"You serious, Todd?!" Jamal erupted. "The sort of shit who would sell out his own tribe—"

"Look, Jamal, he's sniveling enough to sell out his tribe for himself, right? He'll be desperate to make it worth our while. If he doesn't, he won't get out of here with the life he cares so much about keeping."

Todd's explanation made Jamal swallow his argument.

That was exactly the impression that Subaru had wanted to instill in Todd.

A man who would sell out his comrades to save himself. To make them believe that the information he would provide had value, Subaru needed to lower their opinion of him as much as possible.

On that point, screaming so pathetically when he'd been stabbed had probably worked out in his favor. Though he had a feeling the pain he'd suffered was too great for that knowledge to be much comfort.

"Don't blame me if anything happens!"

In the end, as Subaru had expected, Jamal was convinced.

"Trust me, trust me," Todd said, slapping Jamal on the back in reassurance. "Valuing life is just fine. Even it's just his own."

Todd looked down at Subaru, who was hunched over like he was groveling.

3

"Ngh! Wait! What are you doing to him?!"

Rem grabbed the iron bars of her cell, her eyes flaring in anger as she shouted at them.

The location of this scene was the imperial army camp. Having heard Subaru's sniveling pleas, Todd and Jamal had begun marching him over to an area away from the camp.

As she remained inside her cell, Rem's gaze had sharpened when she'd spotted Subaru being marched away.

Subaru looked completely battered and broken.

His body had been pummeled from leaping into the river and being washed away, and he'd received only the barest minimum of first aid for the knife wound on his right shoulder. His broken fingers had been left untreated. The bindings on his legs were undone, but his hands were still tied.

Subaru Natsuki was being led from the campgrounds, looking like a slave.

Rem must have been confused and shocked. Of course, Subaru couldn't explain the situation to her. After he'd died and come back, what little progress he might have made with her had been reset, too, and everything had to be redone.

She thought him an enemy because of the Witch's lingering scent, and he hadn't been given any time or opportunity to clear up the misunderstanding, and on top of that…

"Ngh?! The stench is even worse than before… What is going on?"

Picking up the miasma that grew thicker with each reset, Rem's wariness had gone up another level.

Subaru Natsuki was like devil spawn to her. And there was no point in correcting her impression, other than that it hurt his heart not to do so, and so he would simply do nothing.

"…You must have a pretty complicated relationship. She's reacting like that, even though she's with you."

“She…both of them… ”

“Both of them?”

“…They’re both just tools I bought in order to make contact with you.”

Unsure how to respond for a moment, Subaru decided to feign cruelty.

He was supposed to be a cold-blooded guy who would sell out his comrades to save his own skin. Of course he wouldn’t feel anything for Rem or Louis. Everything had to be secondary to his own survival.

He had to avoid the two of them—or at least Rem—being taken as hostages.

“They don’t know anything. Interrogating them would just be a waste of time…but it looks like you already knew that.”

“Well, it didn’t seem like they were putting on an act. The little one, her head’s probably seriously messed up, and that other one wasn’t lying, either. Going on a rampage when you don’t even know why is dangerous in its own right, though.”

Todd scratched his cheek with a wry chuckle, and Jamal snorted in annoyance.

The two of them were leading a group of around twenty imperial soldiers out of the camp, accompanied by Subaru. He was supposed to be leading them into the jungle to the Shudrak settlement.

Subaru would guide them to its location, doing his part for the empire’s victory, and in return, he’d get to live to see another day. That was the general idea here.

It was a passable success story for a craven coward.

If you’re willing to overlook the impossibility of it.

“If they’re in your way, I can take them off your hands once I’m free…”

“That’s a little hasty. Positivity is all well and good, but don’t forget that what happens to you next depends on the information you give us. You should worry about your own predicament first.”

“Heh-heh, right, right. Just got a little ahead of myself, thinking about when all this is over.”

If he focused on that now, it would just reveal his fixation with Rem, so he immediately changed tack.

As his hands were tied up, he couldn’t rub them together greedily, but he answered Todd while doing his best to evoke that

sort of feeling. Fortunately, Todd did not push any further, just giving Rem in her cell a little wave.

"Just behave yourself, miss. For now, we won't do anything if no one starts anything."

"Do you think you saying that would be even slightly convincing?"

"I couldn't say. Whether you choose to believe me or not is your problem."

Rem bitterly fell silent.

All Subaru could do was regret his inability to provide supporting fire or even say anything as he engraved her figure and voice into his mind, turning them into fuel to ignite his heart.

I have to get her out of here, no matter what it takes.

He no longer had any thoughts of building a friendly relationship with Todd and the others, or getting them to protect him and Rem. They were dangerous as enemy or as ally.

I should avoid getting any closer than necessary to any Volakian.

This was an incredibly complicated situation, and if he wasn't careful, it could well turn into more than just a personal problem.

As Subaru strengthened his resolve, Todd called out to his allies.

"All right, we're heading out. None of you let down your guard."

"I give the orders here!"

And as the soldiers responded, Jamal snapped back angrily.

4

With Subaru in front, the procession entered the Badheim Jungle.

Their aim was to determine the location of the Shudrak settlement. However, their navigator Subaru was bluffing, and he didn't know the location of any village at all.

Not only that, but he also had no idea what the true identity of the Shudrak people was.

"_____"

Proceeding through the dense jungle, Subaru kept an eye out for any sort of opening to escape.

There were eighteen soldiers, and while they were lightly armored, they couldn't move more freely than Subaru could. If he got the opportunity to escape, it should be possible for him to get

back to camp before them and escape with Rem. Or rather, that was the only plan he could come up with at the moment.

Fortunately, it was easy to unlock the cell Rem was in from the outside. The important thing was, he needed to find an opportunity to do it, and of course, there was the question of whether Rem would come with him if he opened the cell for her. And then there was Louis.

"If I say we should leave her, Rem will never come with me…"

Due to the extra miasma from Return by Death, Rem's trust levels had plummeted again. Even if he returned in desperation, Rem wouldn't welcome him saying they should abandon Louis. She might even just beat him up on the spot and take Louis with her before leaving him there in the camp.

"…Or maybe not, even for her. She can't move her legs properly, after all."

Of course, that was only because she couldn't pull that off with her legs not working right. If her body recovered, she would absolutely do it. *I think. And it would be a huge problem if she did.*

Which is why he would have to bring Louis along, too, when freeing Rem. *Why does it have to be so hard to give this deadweight dragging us down the slip?*

And…

"So how long will it take to reach the settlement?"

"…Generally speaking, about two to three hours, I suppose."

"Two to three hours! That's pretty quick. If that's all, then that's great to hear. It was looking like a yearslong mission on our end."

Todd's face softened at the windfall he'd found.

He was wearing light armor and had a hatchet at his waist. Subaru remembered that Todd was on this mission while his fiancée waited for him back home. Even if he had suddenly decided to attack and potentially kill Subaru, it wasn't like his background or personality had dramatically changed.

Todd had been sent to this jungle on orders as an imperial soldier, and as a result, he was forced to be separated from his loved ones. And it was not just him, but Jamal and the other soldiers, too. They all had their own situations and their own reasons for being on this mission.

In that sense, there was no reason for him to be fighting them. They'd just been unlucky. Several unfortunate events had overlapped. The situation was not great. There were a lot of ways

he could have put it, but that was just how it was.

But…

"…I know it's not for me to say so, but isn't this a little careless? For you to only bring this many people to the Shudrak village?"

"You think you're in a position to worry about us, huh? There's no guarantee your head'll still be on your shoulders at the end of this. You better work hard to humor us."

"Jamal, sir…"

"Don't get friendly with me, you filthy traitor. I'll cut you to pieces when this is done, and those damn girls, too… General Second-Class Zickle loves him some women; maybe I'll offer them to him. I bet he'd love that."

Jamal's eyes and voice were dangerous; he seemed to genuinely despise Subaru. And since Jamal's relationship with Rem was also awful, letting him have the deciding vote in this situation could only go terribly.

"C'mon, Jamal… Spare me all that nonsense. It's exhausting."

Of course, Todd was the one to soothe Jamal and calm the situation.

"Relax. Don't forget, if anything we've gotta humor him. He's giving us information to save himself. And in exchange, we have to save him, or else we'll end up getting attacked all at once by the Shudrak on our way to the village."

"Bring it. If they try, we can kill them all ourselves," Jamal shot back impudently.

"Are you serious? I'm not picking a fight I can't win. And you don't want to leave your little sister a widow before she's even married, do you, Big Bro?"

"Gh…"

Subaru was getting to see a side of them that he hadn't seen before, but unfortunately, it did not make him feel anything. He had already resolved to do what he had to do when it came to them.

The way they met, this whole situation—it was all a stroke of bad luck.

"But Rem is more important to me."

So he was going to put them in danger.

"—?"

Suddenly, in the back of the exploration squad, a lone soldier

made a noise. He turned his head, as if he'd noticed something and was looking for it.

Feeling faintly uneasy and unable to ignore it, he peered into the depths of the jungle, and—

"Ah?"

—met a pair of yellow eyes floating in the darkness.

"Demon beaaaaaaaast!!!"

Immediately, the soldier warned his comrades.

His reaction was perfect. The same could have been said of his comrades, who immediately prepared for combat.

But then the soldier drew his sword and charged at the demon beast.

That could have been considered rash.

"Whoooooa!!!"

Because the opponent the soldier had charged into the jungle to attack was a giant snake—a thirty-foot-long, green-scaled snake demon beast.

It was of the same species as the one Subaru had encountered earlier, and for the soldiers, who hadn't known there were demon beasts in the jungle, it came as a complete surprise.

But attempting to immediately deal with the danger of the demon beast was both the correct judgment, and yet also a mistake. Because it was not the imperial soldiers the demon beast was after.

Its goal was none other than Subaru Natsuki, who was standing in a massive cloud of miasma.

"_____Tsss!!!"

The sword slash struck its scales, and the snake roared while sweeping the soldier aside with its tail. Its yellow eyes gleamed ferociously as it hammered the procession with a tremendous roar.

Having spent a year being a decoy for demon beasts, Subaru was a pro at it.

In most cases, demon beasts would proactively target Subaru, with all his miasma, but only until someone threatened them. It was the same for the giant snake as it had been for the White Whale.

The White Whale had targeted Wilhelm because he'd attacked it, and the snake had turned its fangs on the hunter who had shot it. And Subaru had used that law to his advantage here.

The snake now turned its attention from Subaru to the soldiers in armor, who were directing their malice at the snake.

"Ngh! A demon beast?! No one mentioned anything about

that!!!”

Facing down the giant snake’s animosity, Jamal shouted these words while drawing a pair of swords. And surprisingly, he displayed a genuinely high level of skill, boldly attacking the demon beast with swift and agile movements.

However, Subaru wouldn’t support Jamal’s unexpectedly difficult fighting.

Subaru had spent a few hours tromping through the jungle with the soldiers, aiming for this exact outcome.

The soldiers did not know there were demon beasts in the jungle. Demon beasts that were drawn to Subaru by his miasma. He’d used his body’s smell to control demon beasts like always, making him a skilled demon beast master, too.

When I meet up with Meili again, I should challenge her to the title of demon beast master by comparing our stats.

But I don’t have time to worry about that right now.

“I have to…”

…use this opportunity to get back to camp and free Rem.

Just as he was about to start running, he felt a terrifying chill at the nape of his neck. Reacting immediately, he frantically ducked his head.

Just then, a hatchet swung right through where his head had been and landed in the trunk of the tree right next to him.

“Ngh!”

Had he not ducked, Subaru would have died on the spot.

Shuddering at that realization, Subaru turned around and looked at his attacker.

Todd was glaring at him with a furious scowl.

“Ngh!”

Not wanting to be pinned in place by that gaze, Subaru started sprinting through the jungle.

If he stopped, Todd would catch him. And if he was caught, Todd would surely kill him. Those eyes were filled with that sort of powerful determination. A pitch-black resolve.

Subaru felt a different sort of terror than he’d felt when facing Archbishops, demon beasts, or even Reid Astrea.

Those eyes shone with unrelenting tenacity.

“Gah?!”

As he ran, there was a heavy thud in his back.

Although he didn’t turn back, he could tell a knife had buried

itself right by his shoulder blade—it looked like the knife had returned to him in an unpleasant way.

Subaru ran desperately, breathing raggedly with the knife still sticking out of his shoulder.

Behind him, the demon beast and the soldiers were still fighting, but Subaru kept running to avoid bumping into any other demon beasts or being caught by Todd.

Desperately, desperately, desperately running and running and running.

Subaru ran—breathing ragged, coughing up blood, tripping any number of times then actually falling, his whole body covered in mud as he continued to flee, desperately trying to get back to the army's camp.

"Rem… Rem… Re…em…"

His speed had fallen to the point where a child could walk faster than him, and as his parched throat itched and he ran out of oxygen, focus, and endurance, he was fixated on only one thing.

Reach Rem, get her out, save her, and get back to everyone.

Return to where Emilia and Beatrice, Ram and Petra and Frederica, Garfiel and Otto, and even Roswaal were, and recover Rem's happy moments.

The time she should have had, that happy time surrounded by love, and…

"…Ah."

As he reached toward that faint dream, Subaru's leg swung through the air.

Having suddenly lost his footing, he couldn't support himself with his arms as he tumbled and fell upside down.

It felt like he was falling upside down. He couldn't shout. He couldn't open his mouth.

He just fell.

He fell, and fell, and like a bubble popping, his dream shattered, too.

"Rem…"

His parched voice rang out hollowly as he passed out.

5

"How long do you intend to sleep, fool?"

"Chokobi?!"

A shock jolted his mind out of the dark abyss.

The blow landed on the side of his head, like someone was stepping on his head as he lay on the ground—no, not *like* that. It seemed that was exactly what was happening.

The right side of his head was pressed against the floor, and the left side was being stepped on, which made both sides hurt. And thanks to that sharp pain, he had been woken up…

"…Hu…uh? I…gah."

Subaru sat up blearily, the metallic taste of blood in the back of his throat.

Suddenly, his right shoulder and his back, his left hand and his legs, and all the rest of his body cried out in pain.

His vision turned red from terrible agony, and he slumped again, quivering like a fish out of water.

He'd been able to ignore the pain somewhat on an adrenaline

high, but after having passed out and woken up again, it had all come rushing back. But every part of him hurting like that meant…

"…I'm…not dead."

"Of course not. Could a dead man speak? Your current state is more impressive than your half-hearted jester act. I shall at least compliment you there."

"Huh?"

As he checked himself in a daze, Subaru was struck by that haughty retort.

When his mind had made sense of what was being said, and while he remained cautious of the pain that was surely about to return, Subaru slowly sat up.

Looking around, he saw that he had been lying on the ground and that there were several thick branches here and there around him— *No, these branches have been woven together.*

Flashing back to Rem yet again, Subaru realized he was in a prison cell made of tree branches. And he was confused.

He felt uneasy, thinking he might have messed up and been caught by Todd or the others, but…

"You need not scramble so. Your pursuers are not here. Though I won't deny that the situation is a tad too uncomfortable for me to say, 'Be at ease.'"

"You're…"

"I did not expect to see your face again, Subaru Natsuki."

Subaru's ears twitched in doubt as the man said Subaru's name with a smirk.

Only his eyes were visible, so Subaru couldn't say for sure, but he seemed to be smiling.

The haughty man was laughing, while locked inside the same cage as Subaru.

CHAPTER 5

THE EMPIRE OF VOLAKIA

1

Subaru quietly inhaled, hearing an arrogant and overbearing laugh.

There was no way Subaru would fail to recognize the haughty man who had given him directions when he'd been separated from Rem back at the meadow, the same man who had given him that knife. Because of the face covering, it was hard to say for sure, but his voice and attitude were exactly as Subaru remembered them. And the fact that he knew Subaru's name was also proof it was the same person.

"_____"

Subaru had been sleeping on the bare ground inside a wooden cage, and his entire body was battered and bruised, so apparently, he had managed to stay alive.

He had brought Todd and the other soldiers into the jungle, used his miasma to lure out a demon beast, and then used the opportunity when they were being attacked to escape…

"And then I…"

"From what I heard, you triggered a trap while wandering in the jungle. The villagers were making a fuss about a person getting caught in a trap set for a beast."

"Trap… Village…?"

Subaru swiveled his aching head and looked outside the cage.

The cage he was enclosed in was far rougher in make than the metal cells he had seen in the army camp. It looked simple, or perhaps like it had been built in a rush.

And outside, in the distance, he could see a cluster of tall trees, and an open patch of ground that had been created by clearing the

space between those trees—to Subaru, it felt almost like the village in the Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary was a village built deep in the Cremaldi Forest. However, unlike the Sanctuary, which had buildings like houses and a church despite being in a forest, this village could generously be described as a bunch of log houses. It was mostly a collection of primitive lean-tos.

Seeing that, the words came to Subaru's lips.

"The Shudrak?"

"Oh—you know of them? Well, judging by your unsightly appearance, you have surely borne quite a number of burdens in a single day. Did you find the woman from whom you were separated?"

"…Yeah, thanks to you."

As the masked man questioned him, Subaru let out a deep breath.

The man was acting composed, but given that he was also inside a cell, he was in the same position as Subaru—the odds of him being an important member of the village who just happened to like being inside the same cell as village prisoners was incredibly low.

Subaru had just been imprisoned in the imperial army camp, and now he was a prisoner here.

But that wasn't all.

"…This is… My shoulder and back?"

Touching himself in both places, he could tell from the painfully tight feeling that something was staunching the flow of blood. And the pungent smell in his nose seemed medicinal, like an antiseptic, or something along those lines.

The man snorted.

"If you hadn't received any care, you would have simply died on the spot. They were probably troubled about how best to deal with you, just as I was."

"Where does your composure come from…?"

"If I had to say, from my spirit. I should ask you how long you intend to continue your shameful performances, Subaru Natsuki."

"That's…"

Subaru had been about to say "none of your business," but then gritted his teeth at the pain from his wounds.

He had received the bare minimum amount of care required to

keep him from dying—but not anything to make his wounds close faster or to deal with the pain. It was definitely inferior to the medical care he had received in the army's camp.

Thinking back to the camp, though, Subaru realized he needed to get back to that camp as soon as possible.

"Crap… How long has it been since I was brought here?!"

"…Around two hours, I suppose. And that was already quite the kindness on my part. Had I felt no reservations, I would have awakened you soone—"

"Why didn't you wake me up sooner?!"

The man's eyes narrowed as Subaru's trembling knee hit the ground.

From the man's perspective, it was an absurd argument. Subaru had been carried in covered in wounds and on the verge of death. His having allowed Subaru two hours of sleep had been because he'd judged it a danger to Subaru's life not to have him rest.

And in truth, everything hurt. In particular, the gash on his back, near his shoulder blade—the wound from the knife Todd had thrown in that last moment—really hurt.

Thinking back, Subaru had received that knife from the masked man, so running into the man again with that wound in his back was an odd twist of fate.

Either way, though…

"Rem's still in the imperial army's camp… I have to get back before the soldiers who ran into the demon beast in the jungle do…"

He was sure it wouldn't be long before they would get out of the jungle and report back to camp.

Jamal and the others had prioritized dealing with the demon beast once it had broken through their lines, but Todd had prioritized killing Subaru. He'd most likely realized that Subaru had drawn the demon beast in and had attempted to execute Subaru immediately before he had a chance to summon a second one. Subaru couldn't afford to make light of the man's decisiveness and judgment.

And yet…

"I'm stuck here…!"

"…I see. Presumably, this 'Rem' is the woman you were searching for? After you left me, you apparently experienced quite a lot of adversity. There are imperial soldiers outside the jungle?"

“Yeah, that’s right! We were caught! I had to put on an act in order to escape…but I couldn’t bring Rem with me. So…”

“And that is the reason for your desperation? That makes sense. I thought your expression seemed like you were accustomed to imprisonment.”

“What are you talking about?! And aren’t you—”

—trapped here, too, like me?

Even if he owed the man, Subaru had still been about to shout at him because he did not have any composure to spare. However, realizing he was being rash, Subaru then stopped himself.

“_____”

While he was focused on his argument with the masked man, he felt another gaze cutting into him from the side.

Turning around, he saw two lights peering through the gaps in the cage. As the picture came into focus, he realized they were a pair of green eyes. And the owner of those eyes, seeing him turn around, blinked.

“Ah—he noticed.”

“Wha…?”

“Uu has to tell Mii.”

The eyes disappeared.

“Wait!” Subaru quickly tried to call them back, but he was not fast enough.

But by the time he’d grabbed onto the branches, they had left, running off without looking back.

“That was…”

“A Shudrak girl. A curious one, I imagine. When I was alone, she peered in several times as well. It was rather grating to listen to her tell me to take off my mask and show my face…”

“_____”

Apparently annoyed by the girl who’d been peeking at them, the man grumbled, crossing his arms.

Unfortunately, Subaru was not in a state of mind where he could respond to that sort of complaint. His attention had been stolen by the young girl who’d run away.

She was maybe around ten years old, with dark skin. She had white clothes wrapped around her body that covered little but were easy to move in, clothes that probably suited this sort of subtropical climate.

Her hair was in what looked like a bob cut, and the way the

tips of her hair were a pinkish color was probably the result of dyeing it. The roots of her hair were black, which matched what Todd had mentioned about the Shudrak having black hair.

But it was not her appearance that shocked him, because it was not his first time seeing her.

"She's…"

She was the girl who'd killed him.

She was the one who had hit him with the poison arrow that had sealed his fate.

When the jungle had been burned because of what he'd said, she had fled the area where the flames were spreading and glared at Subaru with eyes filled with hatred. That girl…

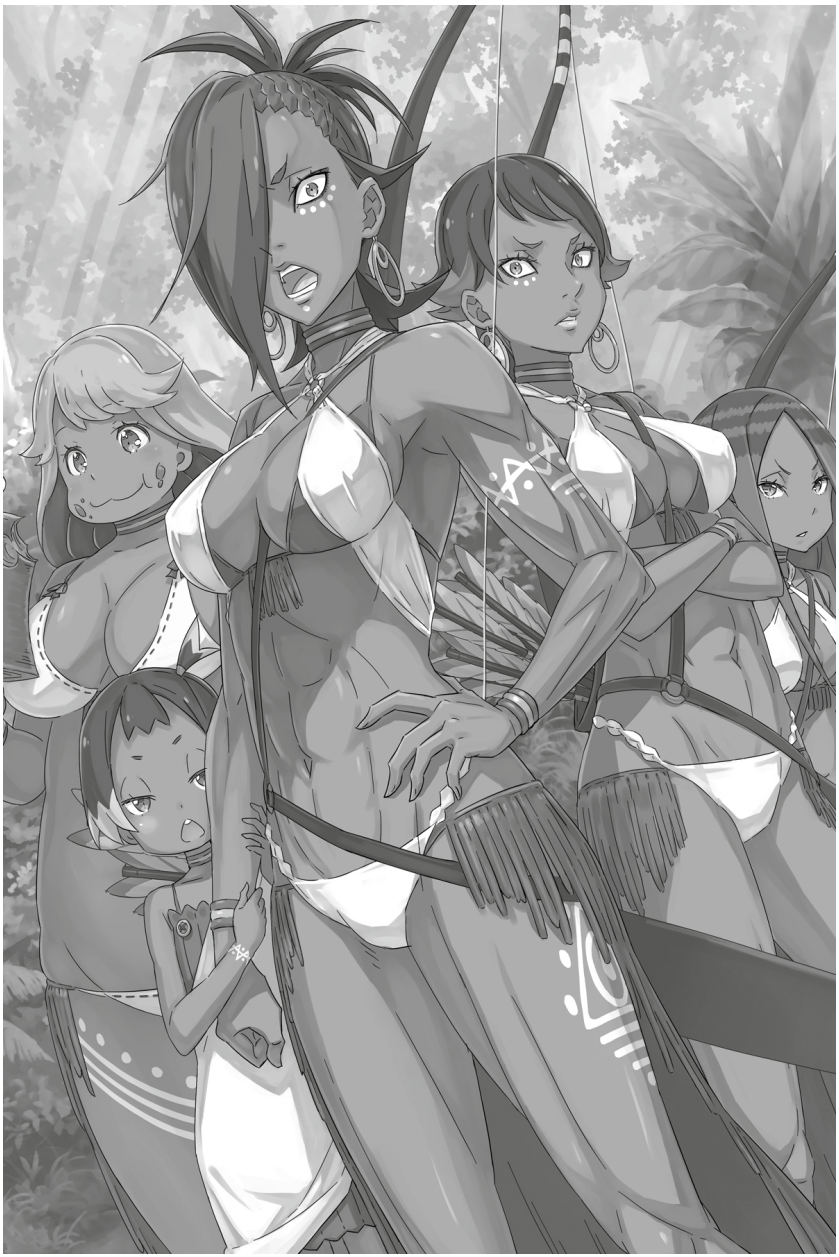
The dots connected in Subaru's mind.

The reason she'd had so much hatred in her eyes was because she was getting revenge for her land and her comrades being put to the torch.

"What happened? You've calmed down, as if someone poured a bucket of water over you."

"…Ah."

Leaning his head against one of the branches, Subaru bit his lip.



The man was sitting where he had been from the start, observing Subaru's emotional rollercoaster. Subaru looked away, feeling miserable beneath his gaze.

"You are an elusive man. Either way, though, spare me the shouting. There are enough annoyances here, even in silence. You will only waste your energy. And even if you don't shout…"

"If I don't shout…?"

"They will come to speak to you. Look."

The man jerked his chin to the side. Subaru turned to look in the direction he'd indicated, and his eyes widened.

Gradually, flames began to light the darkness—the flames of torches. Several figures appeared and approached the jail cell.

Walking in the lead was a tall, muscular woman. The tips of her black hair were dyed red, she had white patterns painted over her dark skin, and there was a powerful sense of purpose in her green eyes.

There was a group of maybe ten others with her, and the girl from before was hiding behind her. They were all women.

"_____"

Subaru was overwhelmed by the oppressive mood.

The group had a wild air about them, unlike the Lugunica knights or the Volakian soldiers from earlier. There was a beauty to them, like a pack of wild beasts held together by instinct.

They gave the impression of a band that was built around a core philosophy of acting on instinct, rather than reason or logic. That was the feeling Subaru got as he watched them walk up. Then, stopping before the cage where he was being held, they—the Shudrak—looked at the two men inside it.

"So you're awake. Tell us who you are. Both of you."

Her demand lumped Subaru and the masked man together.

2

—Tell us who you are.

It showed up fairly often in stories, but it wasn't really the sort of thing anyone actually said in real life.

It wasn't often that someone grew suspicious of your identity and questioned you about it in regular life. Whether you had that

question directed at you or you were the one doing the asking, it was something you might go your whole life without hearing unless you worked in a job that tended to deal with that sort of thing.

In that sense, it was not really a question that Subaru was used to hearing. But he could still vividly remember the first time he'd been asked it.

Who was he, and what were his goals? He had been asked that by none other than Rem, when she was suspicious of him when he'd first come to the manor.

"Wait, 'both of you'…?"

Noticing that something wasn't lining up with his memories, Subaru couldn't help the question mark hovering over his head.

Even though they were in the same cell, Subaru and the masked man's connection was pretty weak. In fact, the two of them being in the same cell had more to do with the decision to jail them than anything else about them.

Treating the two of them the same way was a bit unreasonable.

"Do not dwell on trivialities. It was I who told them that we were acquainted. That is the only reason she asks."

"You…! Acquainted… That's overselling it a bit!"

"I spoke no lie. We both recognized each other on sight. What more is there to the term 'acquaintance' than that?"

"Th-that's a crazy sort of logic…"

It was a very forced definition, but that kind of overbearing argument was familiar to Subaru. In fact, there was an acquaintance of his who often cornered him and others with just that sort of logic.

Are there just lots of powerful people like this…?

As Subaru's head spun a little…

"Hey, what are you whispering about? Answer the question."

"Ah, right. My name is Subaru Natsuki. As you can see, I am a pitifully and pathetically battered lost soul! And the guy behind me is…ummm?"

"Abel."

"Right—Abel! A man who hides his face and has a prickly, arrogant attitude, but is surprisingly generous, since he also gave me a knife when I was lost about where to go. I'm sure he's a playboy who's made any number of women cry! And you are?!"

"H-hmm…? I am Mizelda…"

Caught off guard by Subaru's barrage, the woman at the front,

Mizelda, introduced herself.

And now that he had enough composure to get a closer look, Subaru realized he had the perfect word to describe Mizelda and the other women—Amazons.

All of them were women, with well-developed and muscular bodies, body paint, not to mention the bows on their back—it all fit the image of a tribal group.

The Shudrak people were exactly what Subaru thought Amazons would look like.

“Though finding out the masked man’s name is Abel is a surprising reveal, too…”

“_____”

“But that is for later! Please hear me out, Mizelda, and the rest of you as well!”

Saving the masked man, Abel, for later, Subaru raised his voice and addressed the women gathered there.

At a glance, they did not seem intent on killing him without talking first, judging both from the fact that they had given his wounds any care at all, and how they appeared open to listening to him.

In which case, if he addressed them earnestly, they might come to an understanding.

“You might know this already, but the empire’s army has set up camp outside this jungle. A girl who’s important to me is being held there, and if I don’t get back as soon as possible, it will be dangerous for her! So please, let me go!”

“_____”

“Also, their army is trying to find the people of Shudrak. They say they just want to talk, but they are prepared to fight, should it come to it. If…”

Subaru was about to suggest that he could mediate to create a space for them to talk, but he caught himself.

It was true that they might have been able to avoid a fight if he could do that, but it was probably impossible for Subaru to make that happen anymore. As far as Todd and the rest of the squad in the jungle were concerned, Subaru was the person who had led them into a trap with a demon beast. They would never trust him, and it would be asking too much to hold out any hope of that.

Subaru had already weighed them in the balance against Rem and chosen to put them in harm’s way for the sake of saving Rem.

He couldn't run from that choice.

"Sorry, let me correct what I said. It is true that they are after all of you. And they set up camp with a large number of people, so if it comes to a fight…"

"You're saying we'd lose?"

He had been about to say there was no denying the Shudrak would be at a disadvantage based on their numbers and the strategies both sides could employ. But Mizelda's quiet voice interrupted him.

"Ah…"

Subaru realized he had chosen his words poorly.

The Shudrak were probably a tribe of hunters. They polished their skills for the hunt and were always improving. To tell them they would lose a fight was the ultimate pitfall, an argument that should never be used in order to convince them.

"We know the Volakian army is here. But there is an old agreement between us. It will not come to a fight."

"Please wait! I don't know what this promise is, but they're serious about—"

"Silence!"

"Ngh!"

Subaru tried to move closer but recoiled when he felt a shock run through the wooden cage. Mizelda had hit the cage with her fist, her eyes flashing with indignation.

Subaru had once again chosen his words poorly.

Just as they were proud of their martial prowess, the Shudrak also put extreme weight on this old agreement, whatever it was. And Subaru had unconsciously, and without reserve, stepped all over it.

"The Volakian soldiers move their formations outside the forest to train. They have done this countless times before."

"Training…like a military exercise?"

Mizelda furrowed her brow, not familiar with the phrase Subaru had used. However, the trap Volakia had set was coming into view.

They had set camps up around the outskirts of the jungle often under the guise of military exercises, and by this point, the Shudrak were used to it.

That familiarity had made them lower their guard, and the Volakian army was using that to encircle the jungle and take on the

Shudrak all at once.

"But then why do those soldiers have to go that far to hunt down the Shudrak?"

Of course, Mizelda and the other women standing in front of him were certainly strong. It was easy enough to realize that from the overwhelming spirit that emanated from them. But what was the reason for moving a whole army in and setting this trap in order to deal with them?

It was clear from their reactions that they had no intention of leaving the jungle. They were simply living here. So why…?

"Neither Subaru Natsuki nor Abel speak true. And so their words fall on deaf ears."

"Ngh! You don't mean…"

Mizelda slowly shook her head, signaling the end of their talk.

None of the others objected to her cold decision. Apparently, Mizelda was the leader of this group, or maybe even the entire village.

In accordance with her decision, the Shudrak turned their back on Subaru's plea, rejecting him.

He called out to the group as they moved away.

"Please wait! I'm not lying! Everyone is in danger! The promise… They're going to break the promise! Rem and all of you are in danger!"

Subaru pleaded with them desperately.

However, their chief's decision was already made, so they did not stop. The only one who reacted was the little girl, who glanced back curiously, but even so, it wasn't enough to get her to stop moving.

Subaru pleaded until his voice cracked and he coughed up bloody phlegm, but none of them would lend him an ear.

"Geh… Damn it. Why is it always like this…?!"

Slumping down, Subaru groaned as he let his forehead hit the cage.

His right shoulder, the fingers of his left hand… Because of his injuries, he couldn't even vent his feelings on the cage holding him in. Battered all over and useless, he couldn't even make use of his eloquence anymore.

Then what value do I even have?

"…Just not knowing when to give up and shrewd tricks."

Even though he was drowning in despair that made the world

feel darker, Subaru refused to give up and resolved to grit his teeth and fight back against things somehow.

In earlier times, he would have just decided he had reached the limit of what he could do. But he had changed after looking back at everything he'd done before, after reevaluating himself and realizing just how difficult the path he'd walked really was.

He was a little worse at giving up. And that was a light that could illuminate any dark path.

"That was quite the unsightly negotiation."

As Subaru bit into one of the branches that formed their cage, trying to see if he could make enough of an opening to get out, Abel's sneering scorn fell on his ears.

It was annoying. But he couldn't retort. He was the one who had stepped perfectly onto the land mines and blown up the negotiations. It had been the pinnacle of thoughtlessness.

But…

"If I was unsightly, then you were just nothing. Didn't I warn you not to go into the jungle, since there were dangerous people out there?"

"You did. That suggestion served as a guide. I should give you my thanks."

"We're still stuck here even if you do… Damn it, are there no spots that are a bit looser?"

Subaru tried to slam his body into the branches but couldn't find any gaps in the wooden cell that had, at first glance, seemed to have been put together in a rush. The lattice of thick branches was stuck solidly in the ground as if it had been put together using heavy machinery.

Of course, there was no heavy machinery like that in this world, so it had been made by human hands. Either they had built it together as a big group, or else they had monstrous strength along the lines of Emilia's or Garfiel's.

"Making something like this in a village full of women…"

"Do not underestimate the Shudrak people. They are a race of women descended from warrior gods who only have female children, and who have lived in this jungle for hundreds of years. They do not need male assistance beyond what is required for reproduction, and for that, their custom is to capture men from outside."

"So they're literally Amazons… Wait, is that why we were

captured?”

Catching men and using them as tools to obtain their semen.

That sort of thing had taken place in desolate mountain villages in the ancient past. And this was a foreign land in a foreign world, where Subaru’s concept of what was normal did not hold. It was certainly possible.

However, Abel snorted.

“Worry not. They choose their seed with discretion. The seed of men who would lie and attempt to deceive them would bear nothing but corruption. I am sure they would refuse such seed.”

“…Lie…”

At that, Subaru cursed his shoddy explanation.

The weakness of his explanation was why Mizelda and the others had not believed him, even if the suddenness of having to explain it on the spot had partly contributed. It had not become any less of an outrage that he had no understanding of their ways or what they prided themselves on, just because he was trying to explain things desperately and with all sincerity.

“But it isn’t a lie. The imperial soldiers are after the Shudrak people. And…”

“And?”

“They will use fire as a last…no, as a first resort.”

For the first time, Abel seemed taken by surprise.

Setting fire to the jungle. That was what Todd had done when he’d learned of the existence of demon beasts in the jungle. Last time, the imperial army had chosen to burn the jungle on just Subaru’s word.

If they saw the existence of the demon beast themselves, it was unlikely they wouldn’t choose to burn the jungle this time.

“…Unless they were all wiped out.”

That was certainly a possibility, after he’d decided to set a demon beast on them. His plan had involved knowingly summoning an enemy that might well kill them, so it was at minimum attempted murder, even if indirectly. And indeed, there probably had been some deaths in the process.

Considering that, he felt a heavy lump form in his chest, and a pain like a blockage in his heart. However, even if he would have to live with that guilt for the rest of his life, there was something he couldn’t avert his eyes from.

They probably hadn’t all died.

Seeing Todd's quick judgment and Jamal's initiative, it was impossible to believe that the snake would kill all of them. In which case, after they'd slain the demon beast, they would return to camp. And once they did, the imperial army wouldn't hesitate to burn the jungle again to limit their losses as much as possible. Just like last time.

The Shudrak people would burn.

"…What is that look supposed to mean?"

"Nothing…"

Subaru looked away immediately when Abel commented on his expression, but what he had been thinking about was Abel's fate.

He would have been caught by the Shudrak last time, too, in all likelihood. In which case, if they had burned, then he would have burned, too. Maybe without even escaping this jail.

"…In which case, I killed the Shudrak, and Abel, too."

Subaru didn't want to die, and he didn't want to let Rem or Abel or the people of Shudrak die, either. Which was all the more reason he needed to rise up and find a way out of this.

"Do you not understand it is pointless? They are not foolish enough to have left room for someone of your strength to escape. Certainly not with the wounds you have. Why do you go so far for some trifling woman?"

Abel sounded exasperated as he watched Subaru gnawing at the branches, still trying to resist with all his might.

But his words only lit a fire in Subaru.

"Because she isn't someone who can be called 'trifling' to me. There isn't anyone who can replace her. She is the only Rem."

"_____"

"And you—are you satisfied just sitting there griping about what I do? I don't know why you're in a place like this, but are you just going to let it end with being captured?"

When Subaru had first run into him, Abel had been wearing a cloak or something and had seemed to be in the jungle with some purpose. And even if that wasn't the case, from what Todd had said, the knife that Abel had just given away to a stranger was the same kind of knife that the emperor or Volakia usually bestowed on subjects.

It was hard to imagine Abel was out here for no particular reason. Unbelievable, even.

"What do you want to do, just sitting there on the cold dirt?"

“I am simply awaiting an opportunity.”

Abel answered in a terribly quiet voice.

It sounded different from the provocative statements he’d been throwing out, or the ridicule he’d aimed at Subaru. As if his real feelings had slipped out.

“Waiting…for an opportunity? As in a chance, a shot? A shot at what…?”

“I do not know the ‘shot’ of which you speak, but what I await is for the board to be set. Until it is, I have stood by so as not to unnecessarily complicate things by my own hand. I had thought the optimal moment was when those outside the jungle acted, but…”

“_____”

“But if they intend to burn the jungle, then I cannot afford to be complacent any longer.”

Abel uncrossed his arms and slowly stood up. Subaru’s eyes widened, and he froze at the sight of Abel’s slender figure standing before him.

“What is that foolish face for? It is disrespectful to look upon me so idiotically.”

“…You believe me? But the Shudrak…”

“…did not believe you. You, who sullied their pride and brushed aside the old agreement that they zealously uphold. Truly, it was a failure of negotiation that should be remembered for posterity.”

“Ugh…”

Even in his own mind, Subaru knew his negotiations had absolutely nothing to redeem them, so he grimaced, completely devastated by Abel’s evaluation.

“However,” Abel continued, “I am not a Shudrak. Their pride and their precious agreement are as rubbish to me. What matters is only the unvarnished truth that you have brought.”

“…What would you do if I was lying?”

“I would settle it with your life, of course.”

There was a weight to his words that set them apart from joking talk of death.

Abel was serious in saying that he would make Subaru atone for a lie here with death. It was neither joke nor play. He was genuinely, seriously testing Subaru’s resolve.

Sensing that, Subaru reflexively straightened his back. Having stopped his struggle with the cage, he faced Abel head-on. And as

Abel looked into Subaru's eyes, the force of the light in Abel's eyes increased.

"Answer carefully, Subaru Natsuki. Do you have the resolve to sacrifice everything for the sake of what you wish to save?"

"_____"

He asked this directly. Neither hesitation nor falsehood would be allowed.

There was a power in Abel's voice that made Subaru believe that if he wove any falsehood into his words here, he would be killed.

He took Abel's question to heart.

If he could save what he wanted to save, did he have the resolve to sacrifice everything else?

His answer was…

"I don't have that resolve."

"_____"

"All I can offer is myself… But if that's all, then I can gamble everything."

Subaru put his left hand with its broken fingers to his chest as he said that.

That was his true and honest answer.

If he was told to sacrifice anything and everything, he couldn't accept that.

There was too much in this world that Subaru cared about, and too many glorious things he had not yet seen, for him to do that.

So…

"What an impudent answer, you spiteful jester."

"_____"

"However, you did not speak a falsehood. In that case, nothing shall burn today."

Those words made Subaru feel as if he had escaped with his life.

Subaru broke into a cold sweat when he realized his life had been in Abel's hands.

Just like before, in the meadow, Abel did not by any means seem extraordinarily strong. Compared to the powerful people Subaru had seen and interacted with in his time in this world, Abel was possessed of a strength within the realm of a normal person. But even so, Subaru felt like he had escaped with his life by the skin of his teeth.

Abel possessed a power that was different from physical strength or skill with a sword.

“In which case, it is simple. You there, girl.”

“Wah?!”

As Subaru was sweating up a storm, Abel suddenly called out to someone. There was a small yelp in response from the shadows.

Subaru turned around in surprise, and, following Abel’s gaze, spotted a girl nervously watching them from the shade of a tree well removed from the cage.

The girl started to run from their gazes, but…

“If you run, you will miss your opportunity, girl. That is not what you wish for.”

“Ugh…”

The girl groaned as Abel beat her to the punch, and then, grimacing awkwardly, she nervously walked back over to them.

“Uu… Uu is…” The girl’s lips quivered nervously. “Mii said not to listen to the men. But Uu is curious. Curious about you.”

“…Me?”

The girl who called herself Uu pointed at Subaru. She nodded as his eyes widened at that unexpected callout.

“You were so serious before. That we were in danger. But Mii said don’t listen.”

“Ah…”

“Why? You don’t know us.”

Why had he tried to get involved, even though he did not have any connection to them?

Subaru’s breath caught in his throat at the way she’d pointed out his meddling. But it had not been her intention to call him out. She was just genuinely curious.

Why had Subaru been so desperate for the sake of someone other than himself? Why had he been so desperate for the sake of the Shudrak, too?

Subaru did not have an answer to those questions, but…

“I didn’t want you to look like that.”

“…?”

“I didn’t want to see you glaring at your enemies, eyes clouded with hatred.”

The girl whose eyes were filled with hatred as she’d carefully observed the death of the person she had hit with a poison arrow.

Subaru still felt guilty about being the cause of that hatred.

That guilt swirled, becoming a thorny bramble that tore at his heart.

That was not something that could be repeated. Not something to let happen again.

It was better not to return by death. But even if he did die, if he was able to push the people around him toward a better path in the world where he was reset, then…

"That's reason enough for me to do all I can."

"…Uu doesn't understand…"

She couldn't grasp his true motive, even after hearing his answer. Of course she couldn't. Anyone who did not know about his resetting wouldn't have been able to understand what he'd said.

And Subaru didn't feel the need to make her understand. There was no need for the girl in front of him to even consider that possibility.

"…Are you satisfied? Neither you nor I have time for an extended conversation."

"…Yeah, sorry."

Abel ruthlessly, and with utter disinterest, brushed off Subaru's conversation with the girl.

Then he turned back to the girl, and she tensed up, looking up at him as if she felt the same sort of pressure Subaru had felt earlier.

"Girl, I have no intention of leisurely chatting with you. The woman from earlier—that Mizelda, was it? Bring her here. She is the chief, I imagine."

"Mii? What are you gonna talk to her about?"

"Nothing too major. There is just something I would like to propose."

"Propose?"

Abel nodded deeply, looking at the girl and Subaru, who were both cocking their heads.

And then, even though it was not visible from behind the mask, he definitely smiled.

"Tell her we will take the ritual of blood. That is the quickest way to convince them."

3

"What's the ritual of blood?"

“It is a custom that a people who value their pride and their agreements above all else cannot ignore. They will discuss it in more detail themselves. More importantly…”

Only answering Subaru’s question in the vaguest terms, Abel then glanced at him sharply.

The Shudrak girl had gone to inform their chief Mizelda of Abel’s request, leaving the two of them alone.

Which meant the time they could talk privately was limited.

“Allow me to ask. You said you were held prisoner at the camp outside the jungle. How were you treated?”

“…The wounds on my shoulder and back are from them. Also, I had to do chores.”

It would have been more accurate to say the chores and the injuries had been from separate loops, but Abel was so intense that Subaru simply answered reflexively.

“Hmm.” Abel’s eyes narrowed, and then he glanced at Subaru’s left hand. “Judging by the fact that you did not mention your fingers, that was a separate incident? Done by the woman you were pursuing?”

“Ugh… What does that have to do with anything?”

“It is proof that you are the sort of idiot who falls for a woman who would break your fingers.”

Subaru couldn’t really say that was an accurate picture of his relationship with Rem. But he did not have the time or any obligation to get into the details trying to explain it at length.

“In the process of doing those chores, you must have seen the interior of the camp. How was it laid out, approximately? Put that empty head of yours to work and pull from your memory all that you are able.”

Subaru grimaced as Abel peppered him with questions.

“There were dozens of tents, and as for the number of people… Hey, what are you talking about?”

“Do you not understand?” Abel sneered. “It is self-evident. Tell me what you—”

But before he could finish, several sets of footsteps approached the cage.

It was Mizelda, who’d been dragged out by the girl, and…

“I heard from Utakata that you said you will undergo the ritual of blood.”

Putting her hand on the head of the girl clinging to her leg—

Utakata—Mizelda fixed them with a grave look.

It was a gaze as sharp as the spirit she had shown when Subaru had besmirched their warrior pride.

“Where did you learn of the ritual of blood? It is a ritual passed down among us Shudrak.”

“Do not make me laugh, young Shudrak chief. Do you seriously believe that your traditions are unknown to everyone in this world? A secret need only be known by but two people, and it shall spread. You would do well not to imagine that your people are a monolith.”

Mizelda’s eyes grew grim, while Abel’s speech grew more intense.

Subaru gulped as the looks on the faces of Mizelda and all her fellow Shudrak around her suddenly stiffened.

At the moment, Subaru was the only one who did not know what the ritual of blood entailed. However, it was clear that the ritual was important to them, and that Abel’s seemingly disrespectful thoughts were not welcome.

And so, in order to avoid any further confusion…

“Umm!” Subaru raised his voice. “Sorry to interrupt while you’re all getting fired up, but could someone tell me what this ritual of blood is about? Since it probably has something to do with me.”

“…What makes you think that?”

“I mean, earlier this masked jerk threatened me. Asking me if I could sacrifice anything and everything. Of course not, was my answer.”

“Then…”

“All I can gamble is myself. Anything more would be to exaggerate my influence on things.”

The idea of sacrificing anything and everything was something only people with a certain level of strength could say. And unfortunately, Subaru and Abel, who had been captured by the Shudrak without any recourse, did not have that sort of right.

So all they could bring to the table was what they had on them. In Subaru’s case, all he had to gamble was Subaru Natsuki.

“But Abel is right. I need to get you to listen to me. I’m just going to repeat what I said before, but I’ll say it as many times as I have to. In the worst case, I at least need to convince you to let me out so I can protect what’s precious to me,” Subaru pleaded desperately.

"…I see," Mizelda murmured softly. "It seems you do indeed meet the requirements to undergo the ritual of blood."

Subaru's eyes widened, and Abel made a small sound. However, there was one person who had a major reaction to Mizelda's murmured words.

A woman in the group beside Mizelda, whose short hair was dyed blue.

"Sister! Are you serious? Taking what these men say seri—"

"I haven't accepted it at face value, Talitta. I simply thought it a waste to cast them aside."

"Sister…"

At Mizelda's explanation, the woman called Talitta looked down.

Apparently the two were sisters, and looking closer, Subaru realized that they did look similar—especially their faces and the intensity of their eyes.

Mizelda looked at Subaru again.

"You asked about the ritual of blood. It is a ritual maintained since ancient times, to have the tribe acknowledge someone. A rite of passage into adulthood."

"Adulthood… Ah, something like that? But we…"

"…are not Shudrak. Everyone knows as much without you saying anything. Do not waste time on pointless things. What matters is the nature of the ritual."

Abel was exasperated at Subaru's shock upon learning it was a ritual to be treated as an adult among the Shudrak. Subaru's expression twitched at the way Abel had said this, but he understood what Abel wanted to say.

The true nature of the ritual was having the group recognize the challenger as an adult. Meaning it was…

"…a rite of passage to have the Shudrak people listen to us on equal terms…"

"Indeed."

Answering Subaru, Abel then looked at Mizelda, whose arms were crossed. Mizelda nodded.

"If you would face the ritual of blood, then you must prepare yourselves no matter what happens."

"As if you would release us if we stopped short now? Unfortunately, I am not so naïve that I would expect such a convenient turn of events. Nor is Subaru Natsuki."

“Ugh?!”

While they got fired up, Subaru was shocked to find himself paired with someone who seemed to be brimming with enthusiasm, but Abel did not pay him any heed.

“What will you do?” Mizelda asked.

Subaru was already along for the ride, so he simply said, “…I’ll do it. If there’s no other way, then I’ll face the ritual and get you to listen to me. But if it’s something that takes days to do, that’ll be a problem.”

“Indeed. We do not want that, either. In which case…”

“Sister, in that case, what of the elgina?”

Talitta offered a proposal, and Mizelda nodded deeply at it.

“That is good. The ritual of blood is carried out with the greatest hardship that can be found at the time.”

“The greatest hardship… That’s…”

“Elgina.”

Subaru gulped as Mizelda repeated that word.

Utakata’s shoulders twitched, and she shrank back at the sound of the word. Several other Shudrak women grew visibly nervous.

Seeing that reaction in these warriors was more than enough to give Subaru a sense of unease, too.

But…

“There is no going back for you or me. Are you ready?”

“That’s pretty crazy of you to say, after setting this all up without my input. Even if I do owe you, you’re too irresponsible…”

Subaru owed Abel for the knife, but what was happening here blew all those modest feelings of gratitude out of the water. Though he was of course grateful to Abel for helping him recover from his mistakes and creating an opportunity where the Shudrak might be willing to listen to him.

The two challengers seemed surprisingly nonchalant, but Mizelda ignored them and gave instructions to her fellow Shudrak.

“Abel and Subaru Natsuki. You will be taken to the elgina. Prove to us that you can accomplish the ritual of blood!”

With those words, the cell was opened, and the two of them were led outside.

4

Released from the cell, Subaru and Abel were neither blindfolded

nor bound as they were led out of the village surrounded by the Shudrak people.

Traveling in the deep, dense jungle was like fumbling in the darkness, and Subaru's steps were unsteady at several points. Each time, he was helped by a Shudrak near him.

"Gah, sorry for making you help me again…"

"It's fine. I'm strong, so it's no trouble."

The woman who'd caught him when he'd stumbled had dyed-yellow hair.

Her expression and the way she spoke were gentle, and she had a plump, well-rounded figure. She seemed like an outlier among the Shudrak, who mostly had lean, muscular bodies. She gave off the impression that she was easy to get along with.

"Are your wounds all right? I was the one who took care of them."

"Ah, you did that? Yeah, they're fine. They do still hurt a little. Somewhat. Well, a lot, actually. But it's better."

"Ah-ha-ha. An honest man."

Her attitude and the way she laughed so easily were a relief. And she had actually done something for his wounds, too, so she had been a relief in more than one sense of the word.

Serene and kind. That was how she felt. And Subaru's heart naturally softened. But he was really curious about the hunk of meat on a bone she had been carrying in her hand the whole time.

"Hmm? Hungry? Want to eat some meat?"

"Ah, no, I'm fine. It's not that I'm not hungry, but if I ate, I wouldn't be able to move."

"Ah-ha-ha, true. And if your stomach is full, it will hurt when you die."

"Ha-ha…"

She had a gentle feel about her as she munched on the meat, but she was still a Shudrak.

Either way, he couldn't really sense any animosity from the tribe as they guided him and Abel to wherever they were going.

As with Mizelda, from the moment Abeel and Subaru declared they would undergo the ritual of blood, the Shudrak no longer seemed to be dwelling on his initial failed negotiations.

Meaning whatever the results of the ritual, he had succeeded in improving their impression of him.

Even if the ritual doesn't look like it will be successful, we might be

able to get them to sit down at the negotiation table.

"—Judging by your expression, you seem to be indulging in convenient delusion."

"Don't go reading people's minds from their eyes or face. Is everyone in the empire like that?"

"I know not the source of your complaint, and I've no interest in being compared to others. However, the people of Volakia learn to carefully observe others over the course of their life. That is different from Lugunicans."

"Carefully observe, huh…?"

Subaru sensed something lying behind Abel's words.

"Incidentally, have you not thought of trying to escape in this moment?"

"…Can you stop with those vague sorts of temptations? It's not like I haven't considered it, but I'm not going to."

"Hoh. Why? There are more opportunities to escape now than there were in that cell. By making a diversion, you might be able to escape their sight."

"When I lost my cool, I might have tried recklessly running for it, but…"

Subaru looked around them again.

The jungle's darkness was deep. He couldn't see more than a few yards ahead of him. And he only had a vague sense of the bearing and distance to the camp he needed to reach. There was no hope of running away.

And to top it off, the Shudrak around them were all far more dexterous than Subaru, especially with his injuries.

"—? What is it?"

The woman beside him noticed his gaze.

"He's in love with you, Hoo," Utakata whispered. "Since you're the prettiest in the village."

"Wah, how embarrassiiing."

The way she shook her head as her cheeks flushed was totally adorable, but she never once let her guard down. If Subaru tried to run, she would pin him down in an instant.

"Plus, what would happen to you if I did run?"

"…I see. So you are one of those. With contemptible, heroic aspirations," Abel said with disgust as he looked away.

"Say what?"

Subaru was annoyed by that evaluation and began to fire back

at the man who was hiding behind a mask, but before he could get around to asking what Abel had meant by that, Mizelda, who was up at the head of the line, stopped.

"Here."

"Even if you say that, I don't really see anything…"

Even with the torches lighting their surroundings, the range of what they could see was still just a few yards. It all just looked like the same jungle expanse to him.

What is there here…?

"You will understand once you go."

"Daoo…ahhh?!"

Subaru leaned forward, peering into the darkness, and as he did so, Talitta moved behind him and gave him a shove on the back. Stepping forward once, and then a second time, his foot stepped out into space.

He lost his footing, proving he had no ground to stand on.

"This is… Not again?!"

Raising his voice, Subaru stepped out into the void—or rather, down onto an extreme slope. Catching his foot on the incline, he slid down while doing his best not to fall over.

Having rushed down the slope, he somehow managed to catch his breath at the bottom of it.

"That was dangerous… Even though I couldn't use my hands, that waaaaas—?!"

"Out of the way."

There was a thud against his back; Subaru barely managed to stay on his feet, only to end up knocked over for real by someone slamming into his back. Looking back reproachfully, he saw Abel. Apparently, Abel had been pushed down the slope just like Subaru had.

"It doesn't look like the bottom of a hole… Is this where the ritual will happen?"

"Presumably. Now then, what shall come? 'Elgina' is what they said."

"You wouldn't happen to have an idea what that is, would you?"

"'El' means *big* or *large*, but… Mrgh."

As they were talking, something was thrown down to them.

A cloth bag landed at Abel's feet. He peered into it, and…

"My baggage. And your trash."

“My stuff isn’t trash!”

It was the gear that the Shudrak had taken from Subaru and Abel.

Subaru’s Guilty Whip was there, of course, but also, the knife that had been stuck in his back—the one Abel had given him—had made its way back into his hands.

Abel picked up his sword and cloak, and quickly put them on.

Following Abel’s lead, Subaru picked up his things, but…

“What is this…?”

“We’re watching! Do your best!”

His question was met by a shrill voice. Looking up, he saw the girl, Utakata, waving her hands from atop the slope, having just thrown their stuff down to them.

Mizelda and Talitta did not say anything about what Utakata had just done.

So this much help won’t mess up the ritual, I guess.

“Do your best.”

“…Seriously…?”

He saw the girl with the dyed-yellow hair from earlier smiling nonchalantly as she casually blocked the way back up the slope with a giant boulder.

She had a monstrous sort of strength that was hard to believe—but it explained how the Shudrak had made such a sturdy cage, even if it had seemingly been thrown together on the spot.

With the entrance closed off, they were stuck in a valley that extended maybe twenty yards to the left and right.

On the opposite side of the closed entrance, in front of them, there was darkness, but Subaru had no illusions that they would let him cut through it and escape.

“Subaru Natsuki, how much can you use your hands?”

“Hmm? …Well, as you can see, I can’t raise my right arm, and I can’t put much strength into my left hand. Delicate work is definitely out, and…whoa?!”

Abel pulled a ring out of his bag and tossed it to Subaru.

“Put that on the better hand! We have no time.”

Pressured by Abel’s overbearing tone, Subaru quickly caught the ring and put it on the middle finger of his left hand.

In addition to the black gemstone in the setting, it had a high-class feel and an odd, intimidating sort of aura.

“It is a ring with sealed magic. Put it to your lips before using

it. It will expel fire, though there is a limit to how much."

"Huh? Magic? Lips? What are you…?"

"It's coming."

Abel drew his sword, leaving Subaru behind as Subaru struggled to catch up to what was going on around him. Drawn by the masked man's sharpened gaze, Subaru quickly grabbed his whip, too.

With that, he had prepared his gear as best as he could, when…

"…Hey, come on, you're kidding, right?"

As he lined up beside Abel, both their backs to the sealed entrance, Subaru was dumbfounded by what had appeared before him.

Slithering slowly across the ground, it suddenly appeared from the darkness. A lustrous, green, scaly body that looked almost dripping wet—a giant snake.

It was the same sort of demon beast he had encountered twice before already in the Badheim Jungle.

"This is an elgina…?"

"_____Tsss!!!"

With a hard, dry gulp, Subaru cautiously asked for confirmation just as the giant snake opened its mouth wide and let out a roar, as if to answer his question. Subaru froze, feeling the force of that roar wash over him.

"Elgina" meant *big snake*. And the ritual of blood meant facing the greatest challenge.

So the wall that Subaru and Abel had to clear was…

"Fight and prove yourselves true warriors! The eyes of the Shudrak are watching!"

"Gaaaah! I knew it!!!"

Mizelda's spirited voice called out to them from atop the cliff, and the other Shudrak broke into cheers.

As those voices that were not quite support or encouragement rained down around them, the snake readied itself—

"It's coming, Subaru Natsuki!"

"I can see that! Damn it! It's been one trial after another lately!"

The snake growled, drowning out Subaru's complaints as the ritual of blood began.

The demon beast elgina that inhabited the Badheim Jungle.

From what Abel had said, “el” apparently meant *big*, so “gina” was presumably *snake*. Or maybe it was some unique term the Shudrak used.

Either way, I can save the contributions to cultural anthropology for later.

“I have to focus on the enemy in front of me first…!”

The snake opened its mouth wide, baring its sharp fangs as it leaped at them. It was more than thirty feet long, like a big tree had gained consciousness and was rampaging around the jungle.

Its body was like multiple logs bundled together, and the force of its tail was enough to do serious damage with even a glancing blow.

By this point it was unsurprising, but demon beasts really did seem designed from the ground up to kill humans with their sheer physicality.

“Bea—”

Subaru gritted his teeth as he cut short his instinctive call to the partner who wasn’t here.

Whenever he encountered a sudden, unexpected situation, he reflexively relied on Beatrice’s superior judgment and ability to respond.

And that showed itself now in his own inability to react…

“Not good…”

“Fool! This is not the time to be losing your focus!”

Subaru was grimacing at his mistake when a hand grabbed him by the hair at the back of his head.

Shouting in pain, he was dragged down to the ground. The snake’s fangs mercilessly snapped shut just above him, and there was a rush of air as it swallowed nothing. An eruption of dust filled the air around them.

“Whoaaa!”

“Do not make me repeat myself, you imbecile. Keep quiet.”

Subaru was pushed down against the ground by the hand gripping his head. Looking up, he saw that Abel, who was covered in the same dust, had bundled Subaru and himself into his cloak.

It was too small for both of them, so Abel was straddling Subaru.

“Wh-what are you…? Right! Concealment!”

“Right, and so long as we hold our breath, it will not

immediately notice us… Still, though, this is unfortunate. If the ritual of blood had been nothing more than a test of strength, we might have had a chance."

Looking at the snake right near them, Abel's eyes held a mix of anger and frustration.

From what he was saying, Subaru could understand how he felt painfully well. Apparently, the ritual of blood was always different.

There were presumably other tests aside from fighting a demon beast. But they had been flung down the warrior's path to prove themselves by fighting a giant snake.

"I can't use either of my arms properly, and you're a second-rate swordsman… What a shitty situation."

"'Second-rate' is rich coming from you, considering you are dragging me down with those useless things you call arms."

"I've still got a mouth to fire back with, though… Right—about what you said before."

As the cloud of dust filled the air, Subaru held up his left hand, showing Abel the ring on his middle finger. It was the ring Abel had tossed him without much explanation.

He said to put it to my lips and that fire will come out or something weird like that, but…

"How do I use it?"

"I told you already. Put the jewel to your lips and have it acknowledge you as its owner. Then just use it like using magic."

"What is this, some ring out of a light novel…?!"

Looking dubiously at the ring, Subaru grimaced at that explanation. But, ignoring how that had made Subaru feel, Abel peered at the snake's movements through the dust cloud.

Even as composed as he'd been in the cell, Abel couldn't hide his tension in the face of such a real and present threat. Breathing deeply, he clenched the hilt of his sword tight.

"Even at close range, it will be difficult to pierce those scales. We will have to aim for unprotected areas, like the eyes or mouth, or anywhere its scales are thinner."

"We'll have to make some sort of opening for us to do that. I'll…"

"You make the opening. Why do you think we are working together?"

"I was about to volunteer, but having you tell me to go be a decoy pisses me off…!"

But in light of their tools and the conditions they were in, it was the only way to divide up the roles.

Subaru would be on support, with Abel on offense. As usual, Subaru Natsuki's job was only ever to be support.

"It cannot currently see us. Draw its attention with the ring's fire to create an opening."

"Yeah, I got—"

Just as he was agreeing with Abel's plan, Subaru sensed something amiss.

It was the elgina. The demon beast's size brought to mind giant anacondas, but it was far more dangerous because it aggressively went after humans.

And since it was a snake-type demon beast, if it had traits similar to actual snakes…

"Ngh!"

Shuddering, Subaru instinctively put the ring to his lips, then raised it over his head and pointed it in the direction Abel was glaring into the smoke.

Before Abel could question what he was doing—

"Goa."

Flames erupted right in the face of the snake that was tearing through the smoke toward them.

6

Pit organs are an infrared sensory organ that some snakes have.

Snakes that live in jungles and forests are often nocturnal, and so they determine the location of their prey in the dark using their pit organ. Using that, they sense the body heat of their prey, allowing them to quickly capture prey even at night.

Thermography was developed on the same principles, but those snakes possess the ability naturally, making them like assassins in the night.

And aggravatingly, this giant snake also had a pit organ.

"_____Tsss."

As the snake slithered close, it was hit just as it was about to attack. It screeched and recoiled from the fire that scorched its nose while Abel immediately slashed in.

Determined not to miss such a good opportunity, he aimed his

thrust at the snake's throat, carving deep into the demon beast's scales—or so it seemed.

"Kh…!"

Abel groaned, and his right shoulder recoiled.

His blade had made a shallow cut into the scales before being blocked from making further progress. His positioning had not been ideal, but he'd still launched the attack with all his strength. And it had not landed.

"Again!!!"

The demon beast glared at Abel, who was pulling back, and was preparing to attack him when a fireball crashed into the side of its head.

A red light and blast of heat erupted, scorching the humid jungle air, but the damage to the snake was minimal. It stuck out its long tongue, licking its scorched cheek, then turned its yellow eyes toward Subaru and let out a howl.

"Crap!"

This was just the start—they were not even thirty seconds into the fight. But in just half a minute, it was already clear that neither Subaru nor Abel had any chance of winning. Abel's sword couldn't pierce the snake's scales, and Subaru's tricks were poorly suited for dealing with it.

Of course, not really having a chance against overwhelming force was the norm for Subaru.

"Goa! Goa! And Goa some more!!!"

Subaru swung his left arm at the giant snake as it came after him, haphazardly firing off a series of magic blasts.

With each one, the ring flickered with light, and the flames missed the demon beast, hitting the side of the valley where they were fighting and causing part of the wall to break, which separated them from the demon beast for a moment.

"Hey, Mizelda! This is—"

He'd been about to say how rough they had it, but then he gulped.

Up above, the Shudrak were watching their fierce struggle—and they all had arrows nocked in their bows, aimed at the pair.

"_____"

Their faces were blank. All had the merciless gaze of a hunter watching her prey.

Mizelda, Talitta, the friendly yellow-haired woman, even

Utakata. Every single one of them was looking down at Subaru and Abel with cold eyes.

"The ritual has begun. There is no escape from the ritual of blood. If we do not defeat it, then not only will your wish not be fulfilled, but your life will be forfeit," Abel announced.

Subaru froze under the Shudraks' cold gazes.

It was yet another example of the different views of life and death he had experienced since being sent flying to Volakia. The Shudrak could kill someone they had been laughing with just moments ago.

Based on Utakata's behavior, it was probably a view that was ingrained in them from a young age.

There was no meaning in trying to argue the right or wrong of it here. This was not a place to be debating someone on the merits of their beliefs.

What Subaru needed to do was pass the ritual of blood on their terms, and by their rules.

"We cannot pierce the scales of its torso. If piercing its heart is out, then take aim for its brain through its eyes or mouth?"

"The brain being a weak point is true for all living creatures, but…that would probably be rough. In which case, the win condition we should go for is just a little bit higher."

"Higher."

It would be difficult to defeat the giant snake. So they had to aim for the weak point that all demon beasts possessed.

"If we break its horn, it will submit to the one who breaks it. — That's the only way."

"Your plan?"

"The same as before. I'm the decoy, and the shady guy in the mask is the attacker."

"'Shady'? There is naught but a noble masked man here."

Subaru took a deep breath, then exhaled.

They had agreed on how to win and settled how to go about it.

Under the cold, watchful eyes of the Shudrak above them, they would have to prove themselves warriors and face the snake that claimed the jungle for itself.

Proving myself as a warrior doesn't really fit me, and I've never really wanted something like that, but…

"If I can't reach you without it, then I'll just have to go get it."

—With thoughts of Rem, who remained in the imperial army's

camp, in his heart, Subaru stepped forward forcefully.

"_____Tsss."

The snake burst through the cloud of rubble with its mouth wide open.

Subaru held out his left arm straight and pointed it directly at the snake in front of him. The moment it noticed that, the snake's yellow eyes filled with caution, and it closed its mouth and shifted its head to the side. The lowest-tier fire spell was not particularly damaging, but it had at least done enough to make the snake not want to be hit head-on again.

That caution backfired on it, though, since Subaru no longer had the ring on his left hand.

"My left hand isn't aiming for your face—it's aiming higher!"

Subaru swung his whip with his left hand.

His master Clind had taught him how to use his left and right hands equally well, and even with only two fingers that could really function, his left hand was more useful than a right arm that he couldn't raise, so he was subjecting his left hand to even more abuse.

The whip was aimed not at the snake's scales, of course, but overhead, to a thick tree branch growing up above. Winding the whip around it, Subaru leaped up into the air.

"Ngh!"

The snake's jaw stretched as it chased after Subaru, who was airborne.

If he hadn't pulled his knees in, it would have closed its mouth around his lower body and pulled him down.

"Ngh! Sister! He is running!!!"

Seeing Subaru spinning in the air above the battlefield, Talitta shouted these words, but…

"No…"

Mizelda, green eyes shining, pushed Talitta's bow down, stopping her.

"He is not running. He intends to fight!"

She was almost cheering as she watched Subaru spin through the air, hanging by his whip.

He had jumped into a spin like a swing ride at a carnival and took aim at the edges of the valley with the ring on his right hand.

"Gooooooooooooooo!!!!"

It was more a shout than a cast.

The flames erupting from his hand became a furious blaze that scorched the edge of the cliff, burning the vines and branches hanging over the battlefield.

"Aaaaaah?!"

"Waaaaaah! Be careful, Utakata!"

"Aaah, sister! Sister! Is this really okay?!"

As the valley went up in flames, the Shudrak began to shout.

Utakata and the yellow-haired woman hugged each other, and Talitta looked to her sister for permission to shoot Subaru down, but Mizelda, eyes shining, did not hear their pleas. She just clenched her fist and watched.

"Yes, yes, this is good!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!"

Mizelda's cheer and Subaru's shout as he ran out of steam coincided.

The light from the ring went out, and as if answering his final desperate shout, the fireball it sent out collapsed a section of the cliff on top of the giant snake that had been avoiding the falling rocks.

However…

"_____"

As the snake slithered backward, it realized it had nowhere to escape to.

Burning branches and vines had already fallen into the valley, and there was no longer any need for torchlight.

And more than anything, after he had flung so much fire all around them…

"So it mostly sees through heat? However, that is no longer reliable."

The snake had lost track of Abel, who'd hidden himself with his cloak in preparation for leaping out at just the right moment.

"_____Tsss!!!"

Sensing danger, the giant snake's eyes gleamed fiercely. But Subaru was up above it, oozing with miasma; and its infrared vision no longer worked with all the fire around it; and Abel was invisible.

What it did next was simply rush in the direction with the least fire.

And that was just the escape route that Subaru had set up when spewing fire all around them—

"Haaaaaah!!!"

The next instant, Abel leaped down from above, attacking the snake's head.

His sword traced an arc through the air, slashing into the twisted horn growing from the snake's head. It cut deep into the horn, trying to sever it in one go—

"_____Tsss."

Just before the horn would have gone flying, which would have caused the demon beast to lose control, it twisted its head in an attempt to flee the blade. But it was a vain struggle. Its desperation would have amounted to nothing—if it had been struck by a warrior.

"Gah—"

Abel's slash was deflected by all the twisting, and his attack came to a stop halfway into the horn. Before he could push any harder, a swipe of the snake's tail caught him.

Struck by the tail, Abel's slender body was knocked aside. Unable to catch himself, he rolled through the fiery valley, coughing up blood.

"*Cough*… A blunder… It would seem things do not always work out like they do for that fool…"

The snake turned toward Abel, who was coughing up blood, hunched over in the dirt.

The snake's eyes gleamed menacingly; it had sensed the perfect chance to counterattack and slithered over toward Abel. Abel couldn't stand after taking that blow, and he did not have the time to hide himself with cloaking.

The demon beast opened its giant mouth, as if to swallow Abel whole.

There was no time for Subaru to think.

"I come back from the dea—"

It had been a long time since he had blurted this out, but having retraced his steps through the books of the dead in the Pleiades Watchtower, trying to lure a demon beast with this trick was a vivid experience.

That was why he'd even managed to think of it in the moment.

"Gah, gaah…"

Color drained from the world, sound faded, and he couldn't feel the air passing over him. Instead, a dark shadow spilled into the still world.

It was a thing of the same quality as the massive wave of dark

shadows rushing toward Subaru when he'd been so battered and exhausted after they'd completed the examinations, after he had lost Shaula.

"I love you."

"Yeah, I've heard it a million times."

The next instant, he felt a hand coil around his heart and a terrible pain, as if his entire body was being crushed. Instead of his vision turning red, it was more like his eyeballs were squashed by the destructive force.

It was a pain that never grew easier, and a despair and tenacity that never seemed to end.

But when it finally started to fade…

"Look at meeeee!!!"

As soon as the world's colors, sounds, and smells returned, Subaru shouted these words.

Unable to ignore the sudden swell of miasma, the giant snake spun around, looking not at the weak, vulnerable masked man before it, but at Subaru who was cheerfully raising a stink overhead. When he met the giant snake's eyes, Subaru cried:

"I'm counting on you…!"

He kissed the ring on his right hand, then let go of the whip so that he flew straight at the snake. He'd needed it to look up so as to reach its head.

That was why he had summoned the miasma. But also, just a little bit, it had been so that Abel wouldn't die.

And…

"Aaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Landing with his feet on the demon beast's upper jaw, he tripped and started falling forward pathetically.

The white horn with the sword still halfway through it was right in front of him. Just a little more and it would cut off the horn. Subaru punched its hilt with his right hand, using all of his might.

Of course, it was just a punch from Subaru. He did not expect it to be enough to break the demon beast's thick horn. But it wasn't just a punch, either. It was also a blow using a gemstone imbued with magic.

The jewel cracked as it hit the hilt of the sword, emitting a red glow.

The next moment, the light swelled, and an explosion erupted

around Subaru's right arm and the snake's head, blinding and deafening him.

"_____"

Subaru spun as he fell to the ground before rolling a second, then a third time.

His whole body was hammered by the impact, and there was no telling how much damage it had caused. But the right side of his body felt like it was burning, and he couldn't see what condition it was in.

Twitching as he lay on his back, yellow fluid trickling from his lips, Subaru could feel the ground tremble beneath him. But, on the verge of death himself, he didn't realize that that sensation was the collapsing of the giant snake.

However…

"Subaru Natsuki! Hey, Subaru Natsuki! Stand! Stand this instant!"

Subaru was barely hanging on to consciousness by a single frayed thread as someone rushed over to him, wildly shaking him as they called out his name.

He couldn't think of anything.

He wanted to just pass out already. The pain, the heat, the suffering, every sort of unpleasant word swirled around in his head…

"Stand and say what must be said! What of the woman, the woman called Rem?!"

"—Ah…"

"Speak with your own words! I cannot speak your wishes for you!"

The powerful, heated demands twisted their way into his ears, and his body was pulled up. He couldn't tell whether his head or legs were higher, but still, he was pulled up.

He couldn't hold himself up—it was probably just that his upper body was being dragged upright.

"Hear me, people of Shudrak! As you can see! We have completed the ritual of blood and proven ourselves warriors! As fellow Shudrak, you have a duty!"

"Yes—I, the Shudrak chief have seen it! Warriors! Our brethren! What do you wish?! Shout what you would have us do!"

Directly overhead, a voice echoed in his head.

It passed straight through him, as if there was nothing

protecting his brain anymore. He couldn't understand the meaning of the words, but they shook his shoulder, his head, and his soul.

"Answer, Subaru Natsuki. Speak your wish. Wring out every last bit of yourself."

"—Oegh."

"Trace what you desire on those closed eyelids. Nothing can be given to you if you do not speak your wish. There is no feed for an indolent pig!"

Trace what you desire on those closed eyelids.

He could see a silver-haired girl. A little girl with cream-colored hair, a girl with pink hair, a young man with gray hair and a boy with blond hair, and the faces of many, many more people.

—And a blue-haired girl was there, happy amid all of them.

"Rem…"

"What!"

"S-save…Rem…"

"_____"

He could feel parts of himself slipping away as his lips trembled. And once he had said those words, a strength filled the hand gripping his shoulder—what was probably his shoulder.

And then he could tell the voice's owner said "good" with a nod.

"Did you hear that, people of Shudrak? This is the request of your newest member. He has proven himself by staking his life. What he wished, what he saw—!"

"Say no more. We have our pride and courage, too."

"_____"

Subaru slumped, and his consciousness faded.

The voice that had forcibly kept him conscious did not try to stop him now. Slowly, slowly, everything faded…

"You have done your duty. Leave the woman to them."

Subaru did not understand those final words, but they sounded reassuring, he thought.

He thought…

7

He felt something… something repulsive swirling.

Swirling. Right—a vortex.

Spinning and spinning and spinning, a spinning vortex

gradually swallowing up everything.

A swirling vortex somewhere… No, it was swirling inside him.

A brutal black vortex, swirling, swallowing everything, as violent as a storm, as striking as lightning, as ardent as magma.

Perhaps it was a hideous binding spell that had been lurking, sleeping in the depths of his body all along.

The shackles of death twisting, binding, never to be undone.

A greedy cursed seal proclaiming that this life had been claimed, refusing to hand it over to anyone else.

It interacted with the grudge that would have eaten away at his life, struggling, hating, refusing to hand him over. —And as a result, they reached a contradictory answer.

The curse wouldn't allow this vessel to die.

Swirling and spinning, a vortex swallowing up everything.

Swirling and spinning in beasts, dragons, and cursed vessels…

8

The red-flagged tents were for treatment. There were five of them in the camp.

The black-flagged tents were for equipment. There were twenty of them in the camp.

The white-flagged tents were for officers. There were three of them in the camp.

The gold-flagged tent was for command. There was just one of these in the camp.

Subaru had been given the freedom to move around the camp so he could carry out his chores, so he had seen most of the camp in his short time there.

His time in the empire was Subaru's second time seeing a proper military encampment.

The first had been during the mission to slay the White Whale.

When they had set up camp near the Great Flugel tree while waiting for the White Whale to appear, it had not been so serious a deployment as this. It had been more of a field camp.

Afterward, he had gotten several opportunities to experience smaller camps, too. But they had all been simple. None even approached the professionalism of the imperial army camp.

Because of that, he had observed the camp fairly closely, in part out of natural curiosity.

Of course, he had not made a good impression on the soldiers there, with one exception. If he'd tried to go somewhere that was actually important, it would have been off with his head; as such, he only really knew things at surface level.

But even that much knowledge…

"That is sufficiently useful. Knowing anything at all makes a world of difference…and knowing the array of the camp tells us how many enemy soldiers there are. What remains is…"

"For us to demonstrate our courage and strength. You understand well, comrade."

"Yes—show us, the pride and prowess of the Shudrak people, the valiant warriors who defeated all enemies while standing at the side of the famed martial emperor."

Subaru felt incredibly drowsy, like he was sitting in warm water.

And it was through that haze that he heard the voices of a man and woman both brimming with vigor and spirit.

“_____”

He could hear the sounds of other people breathing, too.

He could feel the presence of a large group. Many people.

He could feel the hot, fiery zeal of a large group of many people.

And something that seemed to be growing within himself…

“Let us begin, Shudrak! Here we raise the signal for our counterattack!!!”

“Ooooooooooh!!!”

A tremendous shout echoed, as if the whole world was being shattered.

“Uooooh?!”

Feeling something cold and wet on his face, Subaru lurched up in surprise.

His mind snapped awake as he wondered what had happened, and as he blinked, he saw a world of white.

No, this was where the wet feeling had come from.

A damp cloth that had not been wrung out at all was lying on his face.

He had read in some book before about a type of torture where a towel was put on the victim’s face, and then water was poured over it. A type of torture that only required a towel and water to easily evoke the hellish feeling of drowning…

“I don’t know anything…!”

“Oh, Suu, you’re awake. Uu’s relieved you’re better.”

“H-huh…?”

Hearing an awfully young voice for a torturer, Subaru turned his head to the side in surprise. In doing that, the towel slipped away, and he could see normally again.

I guess I’m not being tortured.

He could see the sky through the leaves of the massive trees above. And the thing that had been covering his face, blocking that view, was…

“You’re…”

The girl who grinned at him as she answered in a high-pitched

voice was the girl with the tips of her black hair dyed a pink color —

"Utakata! Uu is Suu's guard! Nurse! Babysitter! Thank goodness you woke up!"

"…Can't say that really makes much sense…"

"Suu finished the ritual of blood! Uu and Mii and Hoo and everyone else were surprised!"

"…It's coming back to me. Right, I had to do that ritual of blood."

He had embarked on the ritual of blood to have the Shudrak people recognize him as one of their own.

It was a rite of passage into adulthood for the Shudrak, carried out in order to be acknowledged as an adult. Subaru and Abel, who had also been captured, had faced it together, and…

"…No, I can't remember the last half of it at all—I guess because I was too focused. If I'm still alive, I guess that means Abel took care of things…?"

"—? You don't remember? Mii burst out laughing."

"What, at how pathetic I looked? Give me a break… Argh."

Grimacing as Utakata cocked her head, Subaru tried to sit up. But he felt something strange as he put his right hand against the ground.

It felt strange. And not because of the floor—because of something to do with his arm.

"…Um, Utakata? Did, uh, something happen to my right arm?"

"Your arm? Yeah, it was incredible! It was all messy and then it was like, whoosh."

"Messy and then whoosh?!"

Subaru's eyes widened at that unsettling description.

Taking a few deep breaths, he prepared his heart, bracing himself. First, he turned his head toward his left arm. Three broken fingers. It hurt, but it was a relief to see them.

And then he slowly turned his eyes to his right hand…

"…The hell is that?"

It was in such a weird state that for a moment, he thought he was looking at something else entirely.

To begin with, ever since his fight with the Archbishop of Lust in Pristella, there had been a hideous, black, mottled pattern on his right arm.

Capella had claimed her blood was mixed with dragon's blood

and splashed it on Subaru and Crusch both. As a result, Crusch had suffered an unhealable affliction, and Subaru's right arm and leg had taken on this dark mottled pattern, as though he had absorbed the hideous blood that ran through Capella's veins.

However, other than its appearance, it had not caused any apparent negative effects, so Subaru had hidden it with long sleeves and full-length pants and just generally tried not to dwell on it, but…

"_____"

It was so dense now, it couldn't really be called a pattern anymore.

Subaru's right arm, from his fingertips all the way to around his elbow, was entirely black, as if he was wearing a long black glove.

Gulping nervously, Subaru slowly, carefully touched his black right hand with his left.

The right hand felt spongy and almost elastic to the touch, and his sense of touch in it was diminished. It really was like he was wearing a rubber glove on his right hand. Even its movements were slower…

"…No, this is…"

This strange feeling he had… In order to bring it into focus, he stuck the fingernails of his left hand deep into his black right hand. He pushed down and clawed at his skin.

As he did so, the black part of his right hand peeled off and fell away like a layer of mud.

"Ugh?!"

Subaru pushed his finger into the place the chunk had fallen from and focused on peeling it away like a possessed man—until finally every black part, from his fingertips to his elbow, was gone, revealing a clean, good-as-new right arm.

"Wh-what the hell?!"

"Uwaaah?!"

Subaru screamed from the shock of what had happened to his own body, and Utakata fell backward, surprised by his shout.

But Subaru did not have the mental composure to reach out and give her a hand.

"Wh-wh-wh…what's going on with my hand?! It…is my hand… right?"

He checked cautiously, and his right hand moved without anything feeling off.

The black marks that had been on his arm before were gone, and his arm was clean—the same right arm he had been using to tame little girls this past year of his life in another world.

"Who tames what now?!"

"I thought I heard a voice. What are you going on about?"

Someone came over as Subaru was panicking as he checked his healthy right arm.

—No, not someone*; there's only two people who sound that arrogant, and one's a guy and the other a girl, so it's easy to tell the difference. This is a guy's voice, so it's…*

"Abel? So you survived."

"Of course. And with far more composure than you."

That response, and the accompanying snort, came from Abel, who looked exactly the same as before, in his mask of bandages.

He had undergone the ritual of blood along with Subaru and had apparently made it out of the fight with the elgina without dying, either. *Or I guess I'm alive thanks to him, since he's probably the one who defeated the elgina.*

"Hm. What happened to your right arm? Did you change its hideous appearance?"

"This isn't a game; I don't have a slider to change skin color… I scratched at it and the black parts all peeled away. Right, Utakata?"

"Right, right! Suu's right hand peeled away! It was disgusting!"

"I mean, yeah, you're right, but still!"

Subaru winced at Utakata's blunt comment while holding his right arm out toward Abel. After scrutinizing it for a few moments…

"I see," Abel muttered. "Either way, if it is back to normal, then that is sufficient. I did not imagine you would land a punch with the sealed magic stone ring. The right hand was gone entirely, so I thought recovery would not be possible."

"Wait, wait, wait. I don't like the sound of that. Whose right hand was missing?"

"Yours." "Yours, Suu!"

Abel crossed his arms and Utakata raised her hand.

Subaru shuddered.

"D-don't tease me. If it was gone, then what is this right here?"

"It is a hideous and peculiar phenomenon. I had you cough up the key words after you lost your arm and were on the verge of death. I thought you would die after that, but then…a black

turbidity welled from your arm."

"T-turbidity…?"

"In the blink of an eye, it took the form of an arm. If you ask what happened, I can only ask you what exactly did you intend to do?"

Subaru gulped as Abel's sharp gaze pierced him.

No matter what Abel said, Subaru did not know what had happened, either. Most likely, though, it was related to the black pattern that had been engraved in his right arm—the same pattern that was no longer visible.

Or maybe what Capella had said was true, and it was the result of the true dragon's blood's effects.

"Priscilla inspected the stuff on my right leg, but if my right arm was in the same condition, then…"

It had been almost three months since he had been exposed to the dragon's blood in Pristella.

He had experienced any number of deadly situations on the road through Auguria, during the struggle in the Pleiades Watchtower, and here in the empire, but they were never the sort of moments where a slightly abnormal healing ability would have made the difference between surviving or not.

So it was possible that was why he hadn't noticed, in all this time…

"All services deferred for anything other than the right arm and right leg is a pretty inflexible model… How many more ticking time bombs are lurking inside me?"

"So there are circumstances about which you cannot speak? You seem to have quite a few secrets."

"I don't want to hear that from a guy who's hiding his own face…" Subaru answered bitterly.

And then he gasped.

He'd been sitting there thinking about the weird state of his right hand and checking on Abel, but he'd just remembered there was something more important he had to do.

He had taken part in the ritual of blood, and if he had completed it without dying, that meant time had passed while he'd been unconscious.

Which meant even more time had passed since…

"—Rem. Right, Rem! I can't just sit here, I have to…"

His original goal had been to rescue Rem, who had been left

behind. That was why he had undergone the ritual. If he'd missed his chance to save her because too much time had passed, there would've been no point in risking his life in the ritual in the first place.

"Ah! Don't push yourself, Suu! You'll die!"

"Bite your tongue! If Rem dies, it won't matter if I— Gah."

Trying to keep his anxiety under control, Subaru shifted to get down from the bed.

And that was when he realized he was on an odd sort of bed—he was sleeping in a box constructed from interlaced logs, almost like a palanquin—as if he had been carried somewhere.

As he quickly moved down, every part of his body ached.

"Gah, hgh…"

"Fool. Did you think your body had recovered just because you grew a new arm? I told you already. You were practically a dead man. Do you think my diagnosis was made lightly?" Abel said in a cold voice.

"That's… I…"

Abel was looking down at Subaru, who was writhing in pain.

Subaru had noticed a feeling, like something seeping out from the depths of his body, as if to agree with Abel's assessment.

Subaru had known all sorts of lethal pains, and he recognized this was a big, red, flashing warning signal.

A feeling like a balloon or a bucket with a hole someplace it really should not have one, and the air or water or whatever filling it was leaking out…

"But Rem…"

"…You worry for her and not yourself, even in this situation? So be it. I knew that much. Since you wished for her even after losing your right hand."

"…Huh?"

"Here."

Subaru was more worried about Rem's safety than his own life. Abel sounded exasperated by Subaru's response, but he jerked his chin to the side and started walking without looking back at Subaru, as if telling him to come.

"Suu, can you do it? You can lean on me."

"No, I can do it… Borrowing your shoulder will be just as rough because of the height difference between us."

He smiled awkwardly as Utakata peered into his face,

concerned about his ability to walk.

And then, taking a deep breath, he forced himself to stand. Dragging his feet, he followed after Abel, who was walking ahead.

"_____"

A little further ahead, Abel waited for Subaru to catch up.

Standing on a rocky outcropping covered in green plants, he was looking out over a cliff. With tremendous effort, Subaru managed to get up the rock and stand next to him.

And…

"Look."

Abel nodded his chin again, and, turning in the direction he'd indicated, Subaru looked up.

When he saw the view from the high ground overlooking the expanse, his jaw dropped.

He was completely dumbstruck. Because…

"—Huh?"

Black smoke was rising from a camp swathed in flame—the imperial field camp was on fire.

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The battle cries he heard were a victory song that shook the very air itself.

"Agh!!!"

The dark-skinned women warriors with bows on their back, rampaging all across the battlefield, roared, singing a song like he had never heard.

The Shudrak people's surprise attack had pushed the imperial army's camp to the brink of collapse. The soldiers no longer had even the means to resist, and could only flee in terror as they were brought down one after the other.

"This is…"

"Turning the tables and going on the offensive, stealing the enemies' weapons, burning their medical supplies, and targeting their commanders with precision. Without its hands or head, the body can do nothing but flee without concern for appearances. The would-be swordwolf is a pathetic sight."

Subaru could see imperial soldiers down below, scrambling in flight, driven by the black smoke and great bows. But they couldn't escape the Shudrak who survived by hunting in the jungle. Able to

see into the distance, their arrows struck the fleeing soldiers' backs, piercing their hearts with precision.

How many people had escaped? How many had survived?

How many had died?

"This is…"

"Why are you speechless, Subaru Natsuki? Your wish has been achieved by your comrades, using the information you provided. If you cannot smile now, then when can you smile?"

As he peered down at the camp that had turned into a battleground, Subaru's mind drifted. Abel forcibly affirmed the reality of the situation and spoke as if this was exactly what Subaru had wished for.

Unable to bear it, Subaru grabbed Abel's shirt front with his newly healed right hand.

"You think I wanted this? This… This?! Don't give me tha—"

"Did you think your wish could be fulfilled without bloodshed?"

"Ngh!"

Cut to pieces by Abel's tranquil gaze and sharp tongue, Subaru fell silent.

He couldn't say anything to that.

He had thought it was possible to do things without bloodshed. Had thought he *could* do it, even.

Since…

"Allow me to rephrase my question, Subaru Natsuki. Did you believe that your wish could be fulfilled without spilling any blood other than your own?"

"—Ah."

"An absurd thought. A foolish and incorrigible belief. Did you really think that people who are fighting and have no relation to you would be stopped if you simply spilled your own blood? That is even more malignant than your meaningless heroic aspirations. It is pure delusion."

"_____"

Abel showered Subaru with blows as the strength slipped from Subaru's hand, holding Abel's shirt.

"You are a human, Subaru Natsuki. Neither a hero nor a sage. And so whatever you do, people will continue to spill blood, to die, to rob and be robbed."

Subaru's teeth chattered, and he shook his head like a child in

denial.

Of course it was true. He couldn't deny the reality of it. He knew that. But he couldn't accept it. He had not grown up in a world that accepted it as natural.

Even now, after this long in this new world, Subaru Natsuki's principles were still that of a Japanese high schooler's.

"I do not want a hero. I would never cling to them, rely on them, or entrust my fate to them. Bearing everything and building a road toward prosperity—that is something a hero cannot do."

"Wh-what… What do you want to do…?"

His strength slipping away, Subaru sank to his knees, unable to understand Abel.

We faced the ritual of blood together, and he was probably the one who wrung victory from the jaws of the demon beast. We meshed surprisingly well, and I would have said we weren't the worst match. But I can't understand what he's thinking.

Of course I can't. —How can I understand someone who hides their own face?

"What can someone who hides his face say…?"

"My face, you say? Then I shall let you see it."

Subaru did not even have time to raise his voice in confusion.

Hearing Subaru's desperate, faltering argument, Abel put a hand to his own face, and then undid the knot holding the rags. Then the wind blew.

Whipped by the wind, the mask flew off into the sky.

It soared out over the camp that had become a battlefield, riding the wind into the distance…

"It might even be carried all the way to the capital. To the city holding the throne where I should be seated."

Abel watched the rags dance through the air.

Looking up at his bare face, Subaru quietly gasped. He couldn't look away.

There stood a handsome man with black hair and striking eyes.

He looked several years older than Subaru, maybe in his early to mid-twenties. He had a stunning face, and, having spent some time in the jungle and the village, his hair was messy and there were blemishes on his cheeks, but even that only served to enhance his natural beauty.

He had long, slender limbs and a lithe body, a fully formed fine figure of a man.

But the most striking thing about him was his black eyes. And the overwhelming gleam in them, brimming with spirit, that could bring all who saw it to their knees.

Subaru was already on his knees, and he felt like the reason he couldn't budge from that position was not because of his wounds or exhaustion. He could tell—it was because his soul was yielding to the man in front of him.

The reason for that overawing presence was…

"Vincent Abelks."

"…Huh?"

"That is my name. At least, that is the name I have taken until I sit once more on the throne. Though it would be wiser to continue addressing me as Abel going forward."

Abel's lips curled as Subaru looked on in shock.

Belatedly, Subaru realized that it was a brutal, almost feral sort of smile.

Still not knowing the meaning of that name…

"—Abel! Subaru!"

…what unfroze him was the sound of a sharp voice.

Looking toward the source of it, he saw a figure waving as it approached. It was Mizelda, the Shudrak chief with dyed-red hair.

"The camp has been suppressed. Our injuries were minimal, and…oh? So that's your face, Abel? You're quite the looker…"

"Mizelda…"

"Ahem…"

Initially captivated by Abel's face, Mizelda coughed, and then she looked kindly toward Subaru.

"Subaru, it is good you're awake. If you had died without waking up, I wouldn't be able to rest in peace."

It was the gentle smile of someone paying tribute to a person on the verge of death, and Subaru's heart and body froze. Like Abel, she had deduced that he did not have long to live.

"Holly, bring her here."

"Mm-hmm, I know!"

Turning back, Mizelda called out to someone, and received a cheerful, easygoing response.

The yellow-haired woman—Holly—who had easily moved boulders lumbered over to them with a happy smile.

And in her arms…

"Don't struggle. Poor Kuna still hasn't woken up after you sent

her flying.”

“Such selfish…agh! Let me go! What do you intend to do with me?!”

“Dear me, she just won’t listen.”

Holly looked a little troubled as the girl struggled and twisted around in her arms.

She had blue hair and an adorable face that was red with anger. The girl whom Subaru had most wanted to see, whose voice he’d most wanted to hear, and whom he’d most wanted to meet again here…

“Rem!”

In that moment, Subaru forgot his body’s poor condition, his awe of Abel, and his feelings of alienation upon seeing the battlefield covered in flames down below. He forgot all of it and ran to her.

And as he went to Holly…

“You…”

“Rem! Thank goodness you’re safe…”

“Are you the one who did this?! You awful man!”

Just as Subaru reached out to her, she swung her hand and slapped his cheek.

There was a loud sound, and Holly’s, Mizelda’s, and even Utakata’s eyes widened in surprise. The slap had quite a lot of force behind it, enough that he was almost knocked back.

But he wasn’t. Even if she’d hit him, he wouldn’t complain.

Because he had nothing to complain about. Because Rem was alive and there and talking to him. That was enough.

“Rem…”

“Ngh! You are…”

He had been slapped fairly hard, but he still hugged her tightly. Subaru pulled her into his arms, as if stealing her from Holly. Rem was surprised, and then her face flushed in anger.

She clenched her fist, about to unleash a powerful punch…

“…You’re…”

…but before she could land the finishing blow, she realized just how battered and broken his body was.

Subaru slumped, his strength draining away at the relief of seeing her. Wrapped in his arms, Rem fell speechless as she saw the wounds all over his body—his shoulders and torso, his legs and his left hand.

"…Well, the left hand was because of you."

"I know that! But all these other wounds… You'll die like this! You need treatment…"

"It is pointless."

As Subaru smiled weakly, Rem registered a desperate plea, but Mizelda stopped her with a short, unambiguous response.

Rem looked up in surprise at the sharpness of her words.

Mizelda slowly shook her head.

"Subaru's wounds are deep. They will not heal, even with treatment. He is being propped up by strength of will, but that will soon give out."

"Give out— Why all of a sudden…?!"

"—? Because he got his woman back, of course."

Mizelda cocked her head and answered as if it were obvious.

Rem's breath caught in her throat, and Subaru chuckled wryly, unable to raise his head.

"Mizelda… Phrasing…"

"Did I speak wrong? We did everything in our power to answer the final request of our brother. You are a man worthy of that."

"Ha-ha, I'm honored and delighted…"

He was grateful for Mizelda's honest and frank trust, but it was also horrible. Because he knew himself that their prediction and words were not wrong. And so they were putting an unnecessary burden on Rem, making her load just that much heavier.

And she already had enough trouble moving her legs without the extra burden…

"Why… Why…?"

As Rem's voice reached his ears, he lost the strength to even move his neck.

Her voice was trembling, and at some point Subaru, who should have been holding her, was now instead being supported by her arms. Her blue eyes quivered, gazing at him in suspicion, doubt, and sadness.

"Why would you go so far for me? Why…"

"_____"

"Why?"

Why would he do that?

He remembered being asked something like that before.

He had been asked a similar question by a girl who was precious to him. And how had he answered?

His memory was growing fuzzy, and he was starting to fade, so he couldn't recall.

So he just answered with where his heart led him…

"Why?"

…because she asked.

"Because I want you to be happy."

"……"

"I want you…to smile. That's enough…for me."

I want you to be able to smile, surrounded by love and people who care about you.

Smile like a flower blooming, like a clear blue sky, like the stars glimmering far, far away in the night sky.

I just want you to smile.

"…Eh? W-wait, wait…"

Subaru slowly slumped down.

His head drooped. His neck could no longer support it. His upper body started to fall. Rem reflexively pulled him closer, holding him tight, calling out to him as his head leaned against hers.

But there was no answer.

"Peace to our comrade, to the soul of a warrior."

Mizelda stood straight, speaking words of respect, then broke into song.

Holly and Utakata and the other Shudrak who had sung in victory now accompanied her.

It was a song of rest to send off a warrior who'd fought to the end, demonstrating his pride.

"Wait, please. That's… I don't…"

With their song filling the air, Subaru slowly let go of his life. Seeing his tranquil face, Rem shook her head in denial.

She couldn't understand. It didn't make any sense.

The words he'd spoken were no answer to the question she wanted to ask.

But she knew that, at this rate, she would never find out why…

"Please, don't die like this…"

Her soul was telling her that the man who had looked at her with such tender affection couldn't be allowed to die here, even if he was still covered in that unbearable, repulsive, instinctively bloodcurdling scent.

Rem bit her lips, wishing for something…

“Aauuh?”

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard a child’s voice.

“Oh.”

Looking over with tears in her eyes, she saw the blond-haired girl resting a hand on her shoulder. The girl’s face was vacant as she looked at Subaru, who had lost consciousness.

And then she started making sounds.

“This is…”

A warmth flowed into Rem’s shoulder from the girl’s hand. It was gentle and oozed ticklishly into her chest. She could feel her breathing grow unsteady, and she couldn’t hold back the tears that started flowing from her eyes.

The warmth flowed from the girl’s hand, welling up in Rem, and…

“……”

It flowed into Subaru, who was even now on the verge of losing his life in her arms.

“I see. Healing magic? I did not anticipate this.”

“Eh…?”

A man’s voice reached Rem’s ears as she struggled to understand what was happening. Looking up, she saw the black-haired man’s eyes narrow as he gazed at her.

She was about to ask him something, but…

“Close your mouth, woman. What you are doing unconsciously is a sort of miracle that is happening due to the stars aligning. If you lose focus, the effect will be lost.”

“……”

“Questions and anger can wait until you have dealt with what is at hand. Do not let this opportunity slip away.”

There was a weight to his words that was difficult to deny, so Rem closed her mouth and bit her tongue.

He was right, and so she focused on sending the heat into Subaru’s body as she held him.

She did not know what sort of effect the warmth was having. But Subaru’s breathing, which had been fading, was growing ever so slightly stronger.

That was enough for Rem in that moment.

“…I still don’t know who or what you are to me. But…”

She hesitated there, closing her eyes.

The way he’d said that he wanted her to be happy had not felt like a lie.

“If you don’t live, you won’t be able to see me smile,” she whispered softly.

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She activated a healing light, treating Subaru Natsuki’s mortal wounds.

“……”

Crossing his arms and watching them, the man who’d called himself Vincent Abelks exhaled as Subaru managed to hold on to his fading life.

He was a man who was lucky to have escaped the predicament he had gotten himself into. He had managed to grip the hearts of the Shudrak while on the verge of death, recovered that which he’d wished to recover, and had even kept his life in the process.

It was possible to think that he had calculated he would be saved if he recovered the blue-haired girl, Rem, but…

“Were he that adept, he would have had his broken fingers treated first.”

Covered in blood and mud, he had wished for her recovery

while the fingers that she had broken were still untreated.

He was a man without a glimpse or trace of what a so-called hero was rumored to possess.

“I had intended that reveal as a tribute to a dying man… But if you live, then that will suffice as well.”

Having lost the feeling of being masked, Abel’s eyes narrowed as he felt the breeze on his bare face for the first time in a while.

Subaru Natsuki had narrowly escaped death, and he had sealed a bond of blood with the Shudrak. It appeared the imperial soldiers in the camp were unaware of all the details surrounding these events, but that was also within calculations.

The people of this land—

No, most of the people in the empire still had not noticed.

A momentous and unprecedented political crisis had struck the powerful Holy Volakian Empire.

But…

“Prime Minister Belstetz, the traitorous Divine Generals, and the foolish soldiers who know nothing of the summit.”

A hot breeze blew across the hill as the man, Abel, looked to the west, where the capital lay.

Lupghana, the capital of the Holy Volakian Empire, home to the throne he would reclaim…

“Tremble and await my return.”

And…

“You went and survived, so I will have you accompany me, Subaru Natsuki. To return this empire to my hands.”

< END >

AFTERWORD

Hello! This is Tappei Nagatsuki! The mouse-colored cat!

The turbulent seventh arc has begun! With the awakening of a character from her long, long non-REM sleep (a pointless concern), I would like to try all sorts of new and interesting things to make this an ambitious arc.

Did all of you get a taste of anxiety not knowing left from right and being buffeted by ever-changing circumstances, just like Subaru? Actually, in a different sense, this volume was quite the anxious moment for the author, too.

As all of you who have stuck with me this long likely know, this series is being updated (present progressive tense) online as well… and the gap between the web novel and the published books has finally been erased!

That means that the author and God are the only ones who know what will come next for *Re:ZERO*! It is shrouded in mystery! I hope you all will enjoy it! I will continue to be anxious, though!

And while I'm desperately struggling to keep my head above the water, please allow me to move on to the usual thanks!

To my editor I, I suspect this was an even more anxiety-inducing development for you than it was for me. Lately, there's been endless talk about how difficult things are, but hopefully we will get past it soon! Thank you very much!

To the illustrator Otsuka, thank you for all the designs with different hair colors for the Shudrak, among others! I am sorry for asking you to do work when there was no time. But there will be

more new characters in the empire! I will be counting on you!

To the designer Kusano, thank you for taking the bewildering description of a cocky emperor on a throne in the jungle with Amazons around him and making it fit wonderfully! At the start of every new arc, it's a joy to see just what sort of flavor you bring it!

And in manga news, both Atori and Aikawa's adaptation of the fourth arc and Tsubata Nozaki's *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* are being published in *Gekkan Comic Alive*! Minori Tsukahara's *The Frozen Bond* is reaching its climax in *Manga UP!* Thank you all so much!

And to everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial division, the proofreader, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work. I'll be in your care next time as well!

And to everyone involved with the second half of the second season of the anime from Director Watase on down, thank you all so much! It was one of the most difficult arcs in *Re:ZERO*, but with your passion and effort it became a wonderful anime.

And finally, my greatest thanks to all the readers who continue to support this series!

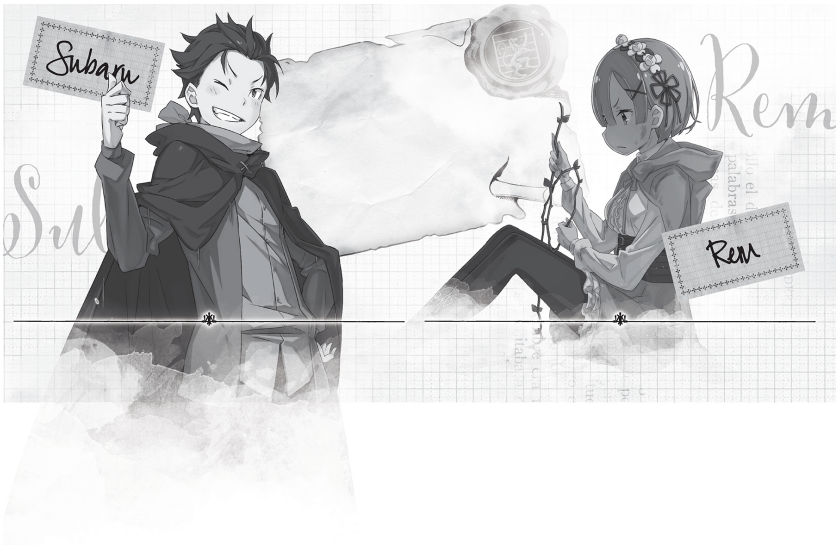
The sixth arc, Subaru Natsuki's deadliest arc so far, has ended, and a new and treacherous seventh arc begins! I hope you will enjoy it!

May we meet again in the next volume! Thank you!

March 2021

<Fired up and determined to spin a good story>

Jungle Tribe
SHUDRAK
RED
MIZELDA
BLUE
TALITTA
Sisters
Older sister
Younger sister
YELLOW
HOLLY
GREEN
KUNA
PINK
UTAKATA
Close-cropped


Subaru
Rem
Rem

“And with that, it’s time for the previews! This is your regularly scheduled *Re:ZERO* infodump. But you’re still recovering, aren’t you, Rem? In that case, just sit back and look dignified, and you can leave the details to me!”

“Huh? Don’t be unreasonable. A job is a job. Even in this situation, I understand that much. And the idea of me leaning on you is absurd.”

“Ugh! W-well, you being so positive is a good thing. It is! Fine, I get it, Rem. This is your socialization rehab, so I’ll do all I can to he—”

“I did not ask for your help… Would it not be best to get down to business already?”

“Right then, the announcements! First of all, Volume 27, the next part of this story, is scheduled to come out in June. As far as its contents go, according to the afterword, only God and the author know what it holds.”

“That isn’t a particularly insightful comment… I spent much of this volume at the mercy of your antics, so hopefully that will stop in the next one.”

“Huh?! That’s not exactly how I remember it. It sure felt like I was getting run around in circles by you…”

“Also, the second season of the anime has completed without issue. The situation in the world was quite difficult, but with the immense efforts of a large number of people, it managed to be quite the good season.”

“Yeah, you got that right. Everyone was working hard everywhere after you fell asleep, but it all came together in the end! All that’s left is for you to come back…”

“_____”

“Whoops, sorry, I’m not trying to rush you, I promise. Take it easy and do what you need to do. Just restart it at your pace, starting from zero!”

“I cannot explain why, but I am incredibly annoyed by that… Also, a *Re:ZERO* web game has been announced, apparently.”

“The game is called *The Forbidden Book and The Mysterious Spirit*! From what I heard, it’s a big adventure in the *Re:ZERO* world with an original character that isn’t in the main series. Keep your eyes peeled for it!”

“Those are all the announcements we’ve been given… Phew…”

“Oh? A sigh of relief, so you must have been pretty nervous? So

you do have a cute side—”

“Huh? Please don’t speak your pointless blather. You are just incapable of being considerate.”

“That’s a really deep jab! Ghhh… It’s rough out here without anyone else. Any chance we can just catch back up with Emilia and everyone nice and easy next volume…”

“What are you grumbling about…? I’m the one who is uneasy.”

“Eh? What did you say?”

“…Not a thing. Please move away. You smell terrible.”

“Another one right to the heart!”

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